Changes and challenges: The Royal Navy's China Station and Britain's East Asian empire during the 1920s

Submitted by Matthew Joseph Heaslip, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Maritime History, November 2018.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

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Abstract:

Examining Britain's position in 1920s East Asia at a point amid changes in the international balance of power, this thesis bridges the gap between the existing imperial and naval accounts of a key transition point in global history. In doing so, it focuses upon the foremost organisation involved in maintaining and supporting the peripheral regions of imperial influence, the Royal Navy's China Station. The thesis provides an important new segment to help in explaining the wider story of the slow decline of British imperial and naval dominance in the 1920s.

Foremost among the findings is an emphasis on how heavily inter-related Britain's strategies for China and Japan were during the decade. Indeed, China was expected by the Admiralty to play a pivotal role in any future relationship between the British Empire and the increasingly expansionist Japan, which adds a significant new angle to existing discussion of Britain's far eastern defence strategy. Providing fresh insights into how those grand strategies were implemented in practice, the thesis shows how naval officers serving in the region willingly and repeatedly deviated from official policy on a day-to-day basis in order to assist their counterparts from friendly powers. Likewise, the evolving threats posed by state and sub-state actors in China are shown to have led to the deployment of vast Royal Navy task force to Shanghai in 1927, which is now generally overlooked and misunderstood. That event marked the last time Britain was able to confidently display its global naval dominance to the world.

Among the more controversial findings, the thesis reveals how the Admiralty secretly circumvented the Washington Treaty by developing military aviation capabilities at Hong Kong under the guise of imperial policing. In doing so it provides the first clear evidence that alongside Germany and Japan, Britain was also actively contravening the post-1918 disarmament treaties it had only recently signed. Away from preparations for another major conflict, the thesis also provides a fresh examination of the contrasting accounts of two violent clashes involving Britain in 1920s China. In doing so, the thesis shows that it is possible to establish a more balanced understanding of events such as the Nanjing and Wanxian incidents, despite the highly polarised accounts of what happened. Finally, the human side of the story is explored, during which the thesis discusses changing attitudes towards and use of Victorian gunboat diplomacy. Moreover, the stresses of commanding gunboats in such isolated circumstances are shown to have pushed some young officers beyond breaking point, with disastrous consequences for themselves and others.

Archival material that is entirely new to histories of the Royal Navy has been used throughout the thesis, adding crucial details such as the important role of Treaty Port volunteer corps in influencing warship deployments. Likewise, by delving deep into the naval archives, the thesis helps to move the imperial histories beyond the wall of steel and blue uniforms to consider the Royal Navy as a complex entity containing a diverse set of individuals. In combination the thesis provides the first detailed examination of the Royal Navy's everyday work maintaining the British Empire in East Asia against the wider backdrop of the transformative changes in world geopolitics.

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Introduction

In recent years, discussion about the global balance of power has resurfaced amid China's economic challenge to the United States of America (USA), questions about the relevance of post-1945 multilateral conventions, and renewed gunboat diplomacy. This is not the first time the world has seen such debates. Comparisons have already been drawn with the interwar period as a key phase in the previous transition between superpowers.[1] British economic dominance had been broken by America's rise. The British Empire hit its peak in size and influence, after which it began a slow decline that led to increasingly desperate attempts at maintaining the status quo, often using Britain's key global power asset; the Royal Navy. Those inter-related transitions were particularly pronounced in East Asia, where British imperial influence came under sustained pressure. This thesis will explore the changes and challenges that affected the Royal Navy's China Station, as it worked to maintain and defend the British Empire's interests in and around China, over the course of that tumultuous decade.

There have been some excellent studies of the two contrasting elements to developments in East Asia during the 1920s. In the field of imperial history, a recent flurry of accounts has explored specific elements of the economic, sociological, and diplomatic aspects of Britain's relationship with China.[2] Perhaps most notably, Robert Bickers has moved forward our understanding of the British Empire's relationship with China and the 'diplomacy of imperial retreat', as Edmund Fung once described it, by a number of significant steps.[3] In particular,

[1] John H. Maurer and Christopher Bell, 'Introduction', in *At the Crossroads Between Peace and War: The London Naval Conference in 1930* ed. by John H. Maurer and Christopher Bell, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014), pp.1-6.

[2] E.g. Ian Phimister, 'Foreign Devils, Finance and Informal Empire: Britain and China c. 1900-1912', *Modern Asian Studies* 40/3 (2006), 737-759; Zhang Jianguo and Zhang Junyong, trans. by Alec Hill, *Weihaiwei Under British Rule*, (Jinan City: Shandong Pictorial, 2006); Zwia Lipkin, *Useless to the State: "Social Problems" and Social Engineering in Nationalist Nanjing 1927-1937*, (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 2006); Zhongping Chen, 'The May Fourth Movement and Provincial Warlords: A Reexamination' *Modern China*, 27/2 (2011), 135-169; Isabella Jackson, 'Expansion and defence in the International Settlement at Shanghai', Sherman X. Lai, 'Nationalistic enthusiasm versus imperialist sophistication: Britain from Chiang Kai-shek's perspective', and Chen Qianping, 'Foreign investment in modern China: An analysis with a focus on British interests', which are all in *Britain and China, 1840-1970: Empire, finance and war,* ed. by Robert Bickers and Jonathan J. Howlett (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

[3] Robert Bickers, 'The Colony's Shifting Position in the British Informal Empire in China', in *Hong Kong's Transitions 1842-1997,* ed. by Judith M. Brown and Rosemary Foot, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997); Robert Bickers, 'Shanghailanders: The Formation and Identity of the British Settler Community in Shanghai 1843-1937'

Bickers has added depth to the human side of the topic, highlighting the diversity of actors involved and their backgrounds. On the military side, discussion has long been framed by debate over the Admiralty's naval strategy in relation to Japan, and to a lesser extent the USA. Christopher Bell's work has been particularly pivotal in that area, re-aligning previous assumptions and providing greater context, notably by emphasising that Hong Kong was still expected to play a pivotal role in British defence strategy after the shift towards Singapore.[4] Those two lines of research have run almost entirely separately, despite both featuring the Royal Navy's China Station, one of the British Empire's two main institutional cogs in East Asia, its third largest fleet, and the focus of this study. Through an examination of what Britain's 'Far Eastern' fleet did and how it evolved during the period, this thesis will show the degree to which events in China were linked into Britain's calculations for the defence of Empire. In turn, the role that naval developments had during the period in Britain's relationship with China and the Navy's indirect influence upon the fortunes of Britain's furthest outposts of Empire, will both be highlighted. Where one branch of the historiography has largely rested ashore, and the other one at sea, the thesis will act as a pier connecting the two.

Bridging the decades between two of the most destructive conflicts the world has seen, the interwar period as a whole has sometimes been treated as little more than a pause in which the major powers recovered their strength, before almost inevitably resuming hostilities.[5] Indeed the very use of the 'interwar' title highlights the extent to which the 1920s and 30s are defined by the wars at either end of the period. David Reynolds went so far as to describe the pre-war and interwar eras as being 'punctuation marks' in our understanding

Past and Present 159 (1998), 161-211; Robert Bickers, *Empire Made Me: An Englishman Adrift in Shanghai*, (London: Penguin, 2004); Robert Bickers, 'Ordering Shanghai: Policing a treaty port, 1854-1900', in *Maritime Empires: British Imperial Maritime Trade in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by David Killingray, Margarette Lincoln, and Nigel Rigby, (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004); Edmund S.K. Fung, *The Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat: Britain's South China Policy, 1924-1931*, (Oxford: OUP, 1991).

[4] Christopher M. Bell,' "Our Most Exposed Outpost": Hong Kong and British Far Eastern Strategy, 1921-1941' *Journal of Military History* 60/1 (1996), 61-88; Christopher M. Bell, '"How are we going to make war?" Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond and British Far Eastern War Plans', Journal of Strategic Studies 20/3 (1997), 123-141; Christopher M. Bell, *The Royal Navy: Sea-power and Strategy between the Wars*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Christopher M. Bell, 'The 'Singapore Strategy' and the Deterrence of Japan: Winston Churchill, the Admiralty and the Dispatch of Force Z' *English Historical Review* 116/467 (2001), 604-634.

[5] John R. Ferris, 'The Greatest Power on Earth: Great Britain in the 1920s', *International History Review* 13/4 (1991), 726-750.

of the first half of the twentieth century.[6] In the context of the history of the Royal Navy's role within the British Empire, that idea of an interwar interlude has been a core theme in the historical discussion of the power struggles with the other major players of the period: the USA, the Soviet Union, Germany, France, Italy, and Japan.[7] As a result, research on naval operations during the 1920s was often neglected, with a tendency to treat the period as the background to the major power struggles in the 1930s. More recently, there have been new discussion about rising tensions and the threat of a major power conflict during the 1920s, notably Bell's examination of a potential war with Japan, but otherwise the decade is still largely viewed as one of peace.[8]

Little research has gone into the potential for Britain to have been drawn into a modest initial conflict, such as the civil wars in China, and how important those wider developments were in shaping British defence policy. Perhaps the only significant exception to that rule has been discussion of the 1922 Chanak Affair, when Mustafa Kemal's nationalist movement challenged some of the conditions laid down in the Treaty of Sèvres. [9] Kemal ordered the re-occupation of Istanbul and Eastern Thrace, culminating in a stand-off between Turkish troops and the Allied force stationed to hold the Çanakkale (Chanak) region, controlling the strategically important Dardanelles Straits. Ultimately war was only narrowly avoided.[10] The fact that war did not result from such interventions in the 1920s does not mean that the events were peaceful, or that the threat of force by a major power was sufficient to ensure the peaceful capitulation of a lesser power. Indeed, in the case of the Chanak Crisis, the lesser power, Turkey, was seemingly willing to fight and it was Britain that eventually backed down. The 'Great War' may have ended, but the world had not moved on to a 'Great Peace'.

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[6] David Reynolds, 'The Origins of the Two "World Wars": Historical Discourse and International Politics', *Journal of Contemporary History* 38/1 (2003), 29.

[7] E.g. Brian Bond, *British military policy between the two World Wars*, (Oxford: OUP, 1980), pp.36-40; Brian Bond, *War and Society in Europe, 1870-1970,* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), pp.142-150; Lawrence J. Butler, 'The British Empire, 1918-1945: Interwar change and wartime pressures', pp.18-21, in *Crises of Empire: Decolonisation and Europe's Imperial States, 1918-1975*, ed. by Lawrence J. Butler, Bob Moore and Martin Thomas, (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 17-46; Barry Watts and Williamson Murray, 'Military Innovation in Peacetime', in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, ed. by Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), pp.371-373.

[8] Jeremy Black, *The British Seaborne Empire,* (Yale: YUP, 2004), p.290; Bell, *The Royal Navy*, pp.60-69 & p.184.

[9] Stephen W. Roskill, *Naval policy between the wars. Vol.1, The period of Anglo-American antagonism 1919-1929,* (London: Collins, 1968), pp. 188-200; Joseph Moretz, *The Royal Navy and the Capital Ship in the Interwar Period*, (London: Frank Cass, 2002), p.162.

[10] John G. Darwin, 'The Chanak Crisis and the British Cabinet', *History* 65/213 (1980), 32-48.

Discussion of this 'violent peace' has been largely limited to events in Eastern Europe and the former Ottoman Empire, particularly between the Russian Revolution and the conclusion of the Chanak Crisis.[11] Otherwise areas such as the Mediterranean have been described as having seen occasional crises, but were for the most part 'relatively quiet'.[12] This peaceful narrative has been particularly true within the naval historiography of events East of Suez. James Neidpath makes just a passing reference, for example, to British forces being drawn into a sustained war due to events in 1920s China as having been 'thinkable', if undesirable, as part of his explanation for why the Admiralty felt it vital to build a major naval base in eastern Asia.[13] This may reflect the field's long-running hangover from Arthur Marder and his tendency to continue fighting Herbert Richmond's battles over preparations for a future major conflict. This has come at the expense of discussing what the mainstream Royal Navy was actually doing in the 1920s, something this thesis will address.[14]

Marder's contemporary, Stephen Roskill, generally followed a similar pattern, but he did mention of a number of events during this period that highlight how the remainder of the decade was far from peaceful for Britain's navy, particularly in East Asia.[15] The Royal Navy and other branches of the British imperial establishment were involved in violent clashes in China, throughout most of the decade. Indeed, the country was the scene of the Navy's most sustained active deployment over the entire interwar period.[16] By examining the China Station during the 1920s, this study will therefore significantly improve our understanding of the day-to-day work done by the Royal Navy. It will show how in dealing with a range of state and sub-state threats, the Navy was involved in multiple violent clashes and how close events in China came to disrupting Britain's peace. In doing so the thesis will consider how new developments in technology, tactical and strategic thinking, and changing attitudes to the British Empire affected the China Station's disposition and behaviour. The overall aims

[11] Robert Gerwarth, The Vanquished: Why The First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923, (London: Penguin, 2017), pp.4-9; Duncan Redford and Philip D. Grove, *The Royal Navy: A History Since 1900*, (London: Tauris, 2014), pp.109-111.
[12] John D. Grainger, *The British Navy in the Mediterranean*, (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), pp.225-235.
[13] James Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire 1919-1941*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), p.15.
[14] E.g. Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dardanelles to Oran: Studies of the Royal Navy in War and Peace 1915-1940*, (London: OUP, 1974); Arthur J. Marder, 'The Influence of History on Sea Power: The Royal Navy and the Lessons of 1914-1918', *Pacific Historical Review* 41/4, (1972), 413-443.
[15] Roskill, *Naval policy between the wars*.
[16] Moretz, *The Royal Navy and the Capital Ship*, pp.258-259.

are to highlight the Royal navy's significant role in Britain's interwar foreign policy, beyond the major power struggles, and to demonstrate the relationship between the Navy's preparations for 'big wars' while it was busy fighting the Empire's 'little wars'.

Research on the interwar Royal Navy was, and to some extent still is, dominated by a few key overarching topics, notably the disarmament and arms limitation conferences, and the associated cruiser arms race between Britain, the USA, and Japan.[17] Core to those discussions has been the debate over the seriousness with which Britain treated the Ten Year Rule. Issued by the British government in 1919, that 'rule' effectively guided the three armed services and the Treasury to assume that no war would occur in the following decade. Over the years, assessments of the rule have gained nuance, notably with Brian Bond's work in the 1980s and more recently by Elizabeth Kier. Both argued that the rule only really applied to major wars that would require an expeditionary force to be sent to mainland Europe, but not to minor expeditions and policing operations elsewhere around the world.[18] By examining the China Station's involvement in the little wars of Empire, this study will go beyond the Ten Year Rule debates, to consider the Royal Navy's full spectrum of strategic deployments and challenges.

The Royal Navy's role in dealing with potential minor power conflicts during the 1920s fits with what Anthony Clayton has termed the work of an 'imperial gendarmerie', particularly in his discussion of the Navy's responses to escalating violent outbursts in Palestine between Arab Nationalists, British garrison forces, and Zionists.[19] While Clayton considered the Royal Navy in a broad context, his focus was on the dynamics of the empire as a whole, and so his treatment of the Navy is relatively one dimensional, as a tool of empire. There are only brief mentions of new developments, such as faster ships, and how there was a

[17] E.g. Andrew Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East 1919-1939: Preparing for War against Japan,* (London: Frank Cass, 2006); Greg Kennedy, 'Britain's Policy-Making Elite, the Naval Disarmament Puzzle, and Public Opinion, 1927-1932', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 26/4 (1994), 623-644; Carolyn J. Kitching, *Britain and the problem of International Disarmament: 1919-1934*, (London: Routledge, 1999); Joe A. Maiolo, *The Royal Navy and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp.5-19; Philips P. O'Brien, 'The Washington Treaty era, 1919-1936: Naval Arms Limitation', in *The Sea In History: The Modern World*, ed. by N.A.M. Rodger (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2017); Bell, *The Royal Navy;* Roskill, *Naval policy between the wars*.

[18] Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine Between the Wars*, (Princeton: PUP, 1997), p.93; Bond, *British military policy,* pp.26-38.

[19] Anthony Clayton, 'Deceptive Might: Imperial Defence and Security 1900-1968', in *The Twentieth Century: Oxford History of the British Empire*, ed. by Judith M. Brown, and William R. Louis (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p.289.

relationship between the changes to the Navy and those in the empire, and vice versa.[20] In effect, this has become a hallmark of how imperial histories of Britain's relationship with China treat the Royal Navy's role, which sometimes rely on Clayton's work as their background to the naval aspects.[21]

If the imperial histories of the British Empire in East Asia take a rather simplistic view of the 1920s Royal Navy, the naval histories have been guilty of almost completely forgetting China. For example, while Bell provides a convincing argument about the importance of Hong Kong as a forward operating base in the developing power struggle between Britain and Japan, he makes no mention of the relationship between the naval base and events in China itself.[22] This is largely a result of how the historiography of the 1920s Royal Navy east of Suez focuses heavily upon tracing the path to the Second World War. Andrew Field's examination of Britain's interwar Far Eastern naval strategy, for example, is built around a core argument that Japan was almost certain to end up at war with one or both of the USA and Great Britain, given its 'Asia for Asians' rhetoric and expanding commercial interests.[23] As a result, most of Field's study is spent discussing how the Royal Navy was planning for a Pacific war involving Japan from the early 1920s, with no consideration of its other priorities for the region. Concentrating upon Japan is logical as a contribution to the long-running debates about the origins of the Second World War, in terms of East Asia, but when examining the interwar period itself such a focus risks ignoring those events that did not ultimately result in conflict. Gregory Kennedy does mention China's significant role in British strategic planning, but after three sentences even he moved back to existing debates, barely mentioning events in the 1920s.[24]

During the 1920s, the British Empire still had considerable interests in China, which had been built up after Britain had forced open China's borders to western merchants through

[20] Anthony Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower 1919-1939,* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), p.80 and pp.141-227.
[21] Jürgen Osterhammel, 'China', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume IV: The Twentieth Century*, ed. by Judith Brown, William R. Louis, (Oxford: OUP, 1999), pp.647-649.
[22] Bell, "Our Most Exposed Outpost", 61-88.
[23] Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East*, pp.5-11.
[24] Greg Kennedy, 'British Sea Power and imperial defence in the Far East: Sharing the Seas with America' in *Sea Power and the Asia-Pacific: The Triumph of Neptune?*, ed. by Geoffrey Till and Patrick C. Bratton (London: Routledge, 2012), p.206.

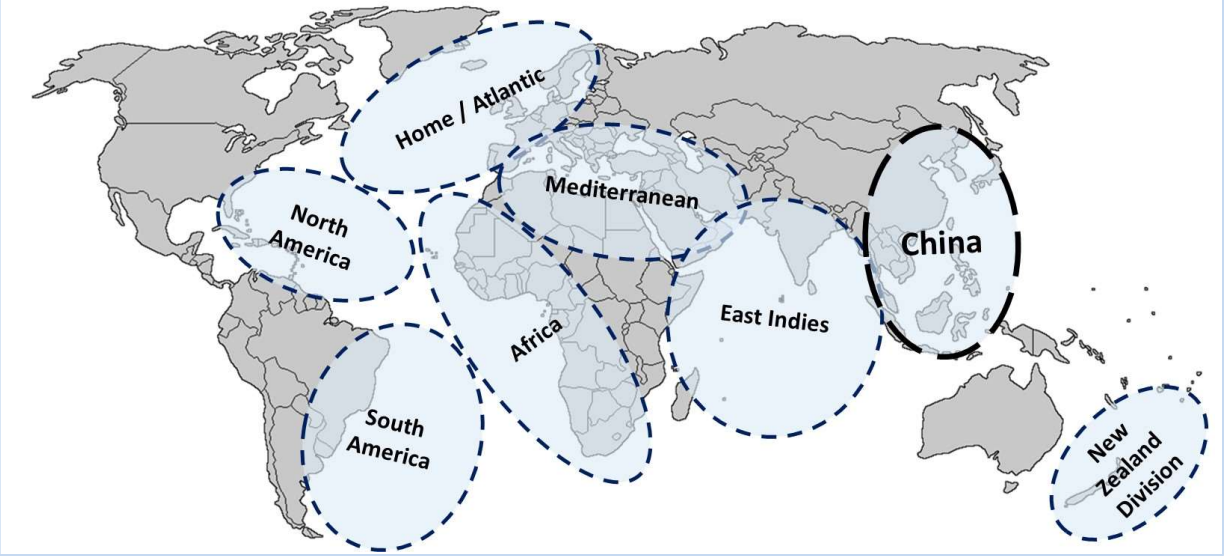
the Opium Wars of 1839-42 and 1856-60.[25] In purely nominal terms, British firms had investments totalling roughly £200 million in China in 1927, equivalent to roughly £12 billion in 2017 when adjusted for inflation.[26] As shall be explored in this thesis, those assets and trade routes were of sufficient importance for the British government to risk sparking a war, over the course of the decade. China was not just an economic concern for the British Empire, however, with the country representing a vital tile in the jigsaw of Britain's global grand defensive strategy. In addition to the well-known imperial outpost at Hong Kong, the Royal Navy also maintained another formal base at Weihai (Weihaiwei) in northern China, and saw China as a key factor both as a potential trigger for a future war with Japan, but also as a source of victory in such a war.

The Royal Navy's China Station

During the interwar period, the Royal Navy maintained a single fleet north-east of Singapore, patrolling Britain's most exposed outposts of Empire. As one of a global chain of naval commands (see Figure 1), the China Station played a vital role in enabling Britain to project its power around East Asia and the western Pacific Rim, both as a tool for promoting British foreign policies and to counter any emergent state or sub-state threats. The main duties had therefore long involved; regular flag-waving tours of the region, as a deterrent against the Russian Pacific Fleet (pre-1905), the German East Asia Squadron (pre-1914) and then the Imperial Japanese Navy (post-1921), supporting the defence of Britain's scattered imperial possessions, and protecting British mercantile shipping against piracy.[27]

[25] See: Julia Lovell, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams, and the Making of China*, (London: Picador, 2011); Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire 1832-1914,* (London: Penguin, 2012).
[26] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, p.4. The 2017 figure was calculated using the Bank of England historical inflation converter: http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/education/Pages/resources/inflationtools/calculator/.
[27] W.C. Bridgeman, Admiralty memorandum to Cabinet about the Navy Estimates, 4 February 1925, The National Archives (henceforth TNA), CAB 24/171/68; Philips P. O'Brien, 'The Titan Refreshed: Imperial Overstretch and the British Navy before the First World War', *Past & Present* 172 (2001), 150; Bell, 'Singapore Strategy', p.610.

Figure 1: Royal Navy 'stations' during the 1920s (simplified)[28]



Prior to the Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902) and First Sea Lord Sir John 'Jackie' Fisher's subsequent decision to concentrate the Royal Navy in home waters, Britain maintained a sizable force around the Pacific Ocean to achieve those aims. It had not been a single command, however, and was divided between the 'China', 'Australia', and 'Pacific' commands.[29] The China command had always been the largest of the three, after its predecessor 'East Indies and China Station' was split in two in 1865.[30] As a result of Fisher's reforms the Pacific Station was disbanded in 1905, with a decision made not to renew it in 1912. Likewise, the Australia Station was dissolved in 1913 with the creation of the Royal Australian Navy.[31] As a result, by the 1920s, the China Station formed the Royal Navy's only significant standing formation beyond Singapore, although during crises it could be supported by the fledgling Royal Australian Navy, the Royal New Zealand Navy division, and by the East Indies Station.

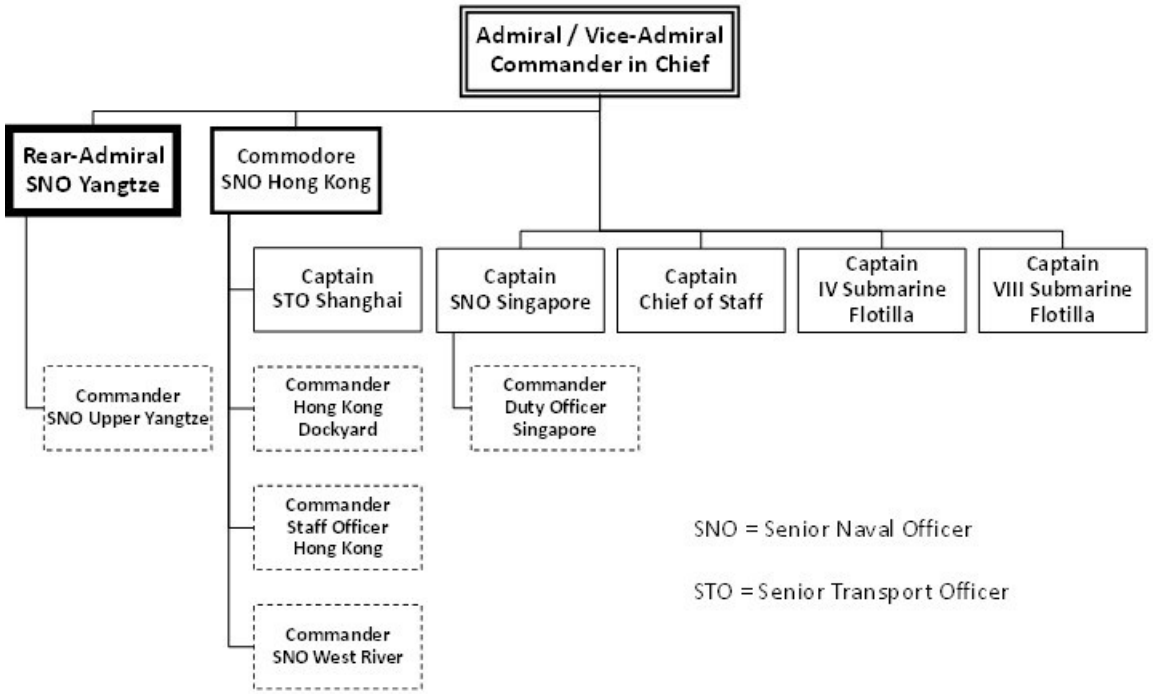
With its focus on the South China and Yellow Seas, the China Station was nominally based around three main naval bases; Hong Kong at its centre, Weihai in the north, and Singapore in the south. Given the vast geographic expanse of the command and the numerous small

[28] Produced by the author.
[29] O'Brien, 'The Titan Refreshed', 149-156; Peter Padfield, *Rule Britannia: The Victorian and Edwardian Navy*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp.209-222.
[30] Scott Lindgren, 'A station in transition: The China Squadron, Cyprian Bridge and the first-class cruiser, 1901-1904', *International Journal of Maritime History* 27/3 (2015), 466.
[31] Nicholas A. Lambert, 'Admiral Sir Francis Bridgeman-Bridgeman (1911-1912)', in *The First Sea Lords*, ed. by Malcolm H. Murfett (Westport: Praeger, 1995), p.68; Peter Overlack, 'The Force of Circumstance: Graf Spee's Options for the East Asian Cruiser Squadron in 1914' *Journal of Military History* 60/4, (1996), 661; Padfield, *Rule Britannia*, p.222.

coal-fuelled warships present in the region, the Royal Navy had also established a network of coaling stations around the Chinese coast and along the River Yangtze. Covering such a large area, command of the station was highly mobile, with the Commander-in-Chief (an Admiral or Vice-Admiral) spending most of his time at sea touring with the cruisers. Indeed, a requisitioned vessel, *HMS Alacrity,* was provided as an Admiral's yacht at the end of the First World War in order to improve the mobility of command around the station. *Alacrity* was then replaced in 1923 by a First World War minesweeper, HMS *Petersfield,* which had been converted especially for the role.[32] His deputy (a Rear-Admiral) was a little more settled and usually present working aboard the gunboat HMS *Bee,* either patrolling the Yangtze or moored at Hankou (Hankow).[33] To ensure that there was always a reliable contact point, a Commodore was permanently stationed at Hong Kong, in charge of the naval dockyard and local naval forces. Likewise, numerous less-senior officers were posted at other shore facilities around the region, particularly at Singapore and Shanghai, working in administrative and duty roles. Given their relative operational detachment, two Commanders were also given the designation 'Senior Naval Officer' for the Upper Yangtze and West River areas, with responsibility for guiding their junior colleagues and providing immediate leadership during moments of crisis.

[32] Admiral Arthur Leveson to Admiralty, 11 October 1923, TNA, ADM 1/8665/142.
[33] See: TNA, ADM 53/75691; Ship's log of HMS *Hawkins* 1923-1924, TNA, ADM 53/78593. The Vice-Admiral is recorded as switching regularly between the flagship *Hawkins* and 'Admiral's yacht' HMS *Petersfield* to tour the other cruisers.

Figure 2: 1920s China Station command structure[34]



Given that it was Britain's third largest naval deployment and remained so over a period of decades, the China Station has been the feature of surprisingly little direct historical discussion. Most existing research about the Royal Navy in interwar East Asia has been focused on the change in strategic focus from Hong Kong to Singapore, as the primary line of defence against Japan, and issues to do with the battle fleet.[35] This has further accentuated the wider problems in the historiography of the peacetime interwar Royal Navy. Even Mark Felton's recent history of the command and its work in China largely skips over the 1920s, to focus upon the major conflicts in the Station's history.[36] While Felton does highlight the important role the China Station had Britain's expansion of informal empire during the Victorian era and in the two world wars, he misses the many pivotal moments where the Royal Navy was involved in the turn of empire in the region. Indeed, his

[34] Produced by the author.

[35] E.g. Orest Babij, 'The Royal Navy and the defence of the British Empire: 1928-1939' in *Far Flung Lines*, ed. by Keith Neilson and Greg Kennedy (London: Cass, 1996), pp.171-186; Kent Fedorowich, '"Cocked Hats and Swords and Small, Little Garrisons": Britain, Canada and the Fall of Hong Kong, 1941', *Modern Asian Studies* 37/1 (2003), 111-157; Boyd, *The Royal Navy in Eastern Waters,* pp.4-29; Bell, 'Our most exposed outpost', 62; Bell, "Singapore Strategy"', 604-63; Field, *The Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East;* Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base.*

[36] Mark Felton, *China Station: The British Military in the Middle Kingdom 1839-1997,* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2013).

account overlooks one of the largest peacetime deployments of British naval force in the twentieth century. Likewise, Jonathan Parkinson's biographical approach, exploring the lives of the Commanders-in-Chief provides some interesting colour to the topic, but provides little context about the command itself.[37] As a result, Malcolm Murfett's recent discussion of interwar naval warfare provides the best insights into what the China Station actually did during the 1920s, but only during one tantalisingly brief passage.[38]

Built up during the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain's imperial presence in China epitomises Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher's assessment of the British Empire's unstated strategy of 'trade with informal rule if possible; trade with rule when necessary'.[39] In essence, as long as Britain got what it wanted in terms of expanding its economic and strategic interests, then there was no underlying desire to expand formal control, given the cost of maintaining armies against potential wars of independence. While critics have raised questions over the applicability of the theory when used over such a diverse entity at the late Victorian British Empire, it works well to explain the Empire's long term position in China.[40] Jürgen Osterhammel gives Britain's stewardship of China's Salt Administration and Customs Service, as an example of how much control Britain was able to wield over China in order to reap the economic benefits, despite China remaining an independent sovereign nation.[41] There have been questions about whether informal imperialism was a deliberate policy, but within the dynamics of Britain's relationship with China there was a long term pragmatic acceptance of arms-length mercantile trade via informal rule, so long as no other power tried to dominate the country.[42] Likewise, David Cannadine argues that it was the relative lack of British business investment in China, when compared to elsewhere in the

[37] Jonathan Parkinson, *The Royal Navy, China Station: 1864-1941*, (Kibworth: Matador, 2018).
[38] Malcolm Murfett, *Naval Warfare 1919-1945: An operational history of the volatile war at sea*, (London: Routledge, 2009), pp.7-8.
[39] John Gallagher, and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review* 6/1 (1953), 13. See also: C.C. Eldridge, *Victorian Imperialism,* (London: Hoddern and Stoughton, 1978), pp.75-79; Ronald Robinson, John Gallagher, Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: the official mind of imperialism,* (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp.1-15 & 35.
[40] E.g. Desmond C.M. Platt, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade: Some Reservations', *Economic History Review* 21/2 (1968), 296-306; Peter J. Cain, and Antony G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: 1688-2000,* (Harlow: Longman, 2002); Osterhammel, 'China', p.646.
[41] Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Imperialism in Transition: British Business and the Chinese Authorities, 1931-37', *China Quarterly* 98 (1984), 263-264.
[42] John Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion', *English Historical Review* 112/447 (1997), 618-634; Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share, A History of British Imperialism 1850 to the Present*, 5th Edition, (Harlow: Longman, 2012), p.137.

world, which limited the British government's interest in territorial expansion. Cannadine goes on to highlight that trade and military concessions were also obtained on an informal footing, with the overall argument effectively agreeing with Robinson and Gallagher's core premise.[43]

In 1911, the Xinhai Revolution brought about the collapse of the Qing Empire and presented a series of challenges for those powers with interests in China. After the failure of the subsequent Provisional Government of the Republic of China and resulting collapse of central government, a range of threats to British interests emerged. In particular, there was a significant increase in piracy and banditry. The warring also brought with it the growing possibility that violence would impact upon foreign residents directly, through warlord armies wrestling for control of the treaty port cities.[44] As trading centres those ports offered a significant potential source of income for the different factions, and many were located in strategically important locations. For much of the 1920s, the Foreign Office attempted to follow a strategy of non-intervention in China, hoping for the emergence of a new central regime, which could be pressured into addressing Britain's concerns.[45] Nonetheless, given the uncertainty resulting from the fluid situation in China, the Royal Navy was tasked with defending against the perceived and actual threats against Britain's interests.[46]

The Royal Navy beyond the battle-fleet

More often than not, when Great Britain took part in these expeditions, in China or elsewhere, it was not the battle-fleet that shaped the events. Instead, the Royal Navy's light cruisers, destroyers, sloops, and gunboats conducted most of its interwar peacetime work, which were only reinforced by larger vessels when necessary.[47] Even then, most of the light cruisers would spend their time either held at a strategic port, or on a flag waving tour of

[43] David Cannadine, *History In Our Time*, (Yale: YUP, 1998), pp.143-153.
[44] James E. Sheridan, *China in Disintegration: The Republican Era in Chinese History 1912-1949*, (New York: Free Press, 1975), p.48.
[45] Arthur Waldron, *From War to Nationalism: China's turning point, 1924-1925*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), pp.161-162.
[46] James Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy: Political Applications of Limited Naval Force*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), pp.17-38.
[47] Memoranda on the Political and Military Situation in China, 1924-1929, TNA, FO 228/2929; H.M. Trenchard, Memorandum on The Fuller Employment of Air Power in Imperial Defence, November 1929, TNA, CAB 24/207; Clayton, 'Deceptive Might', pp.289-291.The events in China are a classic example of this, but it was seen more widely, including the Middle East, Mediterranean, and Caribbean, as summarised by Clayton.

the region they were stationed on.[48] In the aftermath of the First World War, it was those smaller vessels that formed an increasingly important part of the Royal Navy. While only a gradual process, capital ships slowly declined in value with the development of new threats to their dominance, such as the submarine, higher quality torpedoes, and effective military aircraft.[49] Despite the considerable activity of the ordinary fleet, the historiography of the Royal Navy in the period is almost exclusively focused upon the main battle fleet, populated by its capital ships – battleships and battlecruisers and those heavy cruisers capable of fighting in a fleet action.

Joseph Moretz divides the interwar Royal Navy into three sections: 1) the main fleet – centralised in order to destroy an enemy battle fleet, 2) detached cruiser forces – to protect the sea arteries of the empire, and 3) local defence forces – performing the day-to-day work of empire.[50] However, Moretz focuses almost exclusively on the first two sections and therefore the efforts of the Admiralty to prepare for a future major war, assigning the local defence force the role of freeing up the main fleet to provide an over-arching imperial defence. Indeed, this is just one of many excellent assessments of the interwar Royal Navy that have been produced in recent years, but have followed a similar course.[51] This is not a new feature, with previous generations of historians of the interwar Royal Navy equally focused upon the battle fleet, particularly Roskill and Marder.[52] Given that over 400 of the Royal Navy's roughly 475 armed, sea-going vessels in service in the mid-1920s were types used for regional defence, this represents a notable oversight in the existing historiography.[53] It will be that day-to-day segment that this thesis will explore and in doing

[48] E.g. Ship's log of HMS *Diomede* 1924-1925, TNA, ADM 53/75887; Ship's log of HMS *Carlisle* 1924-1925, TNA, ADM 53/72682; Ship's log of HMS *Despatch* 1924-1925, TNA, ADM 53/75691; Ship's log of HMS *Hawkins* 1923-1924, TNA, ADM 53/78593.

[49] Report of Sub-committee on Staffs of Admiralty Office, War Office and Air Ministry for the Cabinet Committee on Reduction of National Expenditure, January 1923, TNA, CAB 24/160/72; Karl Lautenschlager, 'The Submarine in Naval Warfare, 1901-2001', *International Security* 11/3 (1986), 123; Harford Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy Between the Wars 1918-1939*, (London: Heineman, 1976), pp.98-99.

[50] Moretz, *The Royal Navy*, pp.156-158.

[51] Andrew Boyd, *The Royal Navy in Eastern Waters: Linchpin of Victory,* (Barnsley: Seaforth, 2017), pp.4-29; Eric J. Grove, *The Royal Navy*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2005), pp.149-162; Dan Van der Vat, *Standard of Power - The Royal Navy in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Pimlico, 2000), pp.143-155; Bell, *The Royal Navy*, pp.15-77;

[52] Marder, 'The Influence of History on Sea Power', pp.413-443; Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars.*

[53] Report of Sub-committee on Staffs of Admiralty Office, War Office and Air Ministry for the Cabinet Committee on Reduction of National Expenditure, January 1923, TNA, CAB 24/160/72, p.9; Robert Chesneau (ed.), *All the World's Fighting Ships 1922-1946*, (London: Conway, 1992), pp.7-85. A large number of vessels in the Royal Navy's fleet were held in reserve during peacetime, particularly the destroyers and minesweepers

so will highlight its crucial role in supporting the full range of the Royal Navy's roles in British defence policy.

The lack of existing research on those smaller vessels is noteworthy when compared with studies of the pre-1914 Royal Navy. Naval historians of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras almost all make far greater reference to the global deployment and use of the Navy's smaller vessels for trade defence and imperial policing.[54] This is despite the centralisation of the battle fleet under John 'Jacky' Fisher as First Sea Lord 1904-1910 often being a key feature of their research. John Linge's article examining the Royal Navy's policing of Ireland's coastline, during the formal establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921-1922, provides an exception to the rule. Linge argues that the deployment of a moderately sized local defence force into Irish waters influenced the development of the situation in Ireland. His article goes on to discuss how the number of vessels employed in blockading the importing of weapons into Ireland restricted the initial naval response to the Chanak Crisis.[55] Expanding this tentative examination of the day-to-day work of the ordinary fleet, during moments of calm and crisis, will therefore enable a more nuanced understanding of the Royal Navy's role in shaping the British Empire's interwar foreign policy. The ordinary fleet was spread across the entire empire, in contrast to the battle fleet, which by the 1920s was concentrated in the 'Home' theatre and Mediterranean. Studying the role of the mainstream Navy will also shed light on Britain's influence over more peripheral global developments, not directly related to the major power struggles of the era. In doing so, it will shift the historiographical focus away from examining the theoretical development at the top level of the Navy, to examining what was happening in practice with the bulk of the fleet.

This study will achieve this by examining the way that the Royal Navy dealt with the challenges posed by the new situation in China, looking at how the mainstream actively deployed part of the service developed during the 1920s. In particular, the thesis will assess how the Navy adapted to its post First World War environment. Understanding the extent

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that made up the bulk of the ordinary fleet. The overall proportions remain broadly similar, however, given that a number of fleet cruisers were also held in reserve.

[54] Nicholas A. Lambert, 'Strategic Command and Control for Maneuver Warfare: Creation of the Royal Navy's "War Room" System, 1905-1915', *Journal of Military History* 69/2 (2005), 376-386; Lidgren, 'A station in transition', 468-473; O'Brien, 'The Titan Refreshed', 150-156; Padfield, *Rule Britannia,* pp.209-222.

[55] John Linge, 'The Royal Navy and the Irish Civil War', *Irish Historical Studies* 31/121 (1998), 60, 69-71.

of the changes it underwent, will then allow an assessment of how the Royal Navy impacted Britain's relationships with countries, other than the major powers, on a day-to-day basis. In doing so a variety of factors will be considered, such as the financial restrictions imposed upon the Navy, the emergence of new technology and equipment, as well as changes in both institutional and wider social attitudes and ideas.

The Royal Navy's role in Britain's Interwar foreign policy

Great Britain's early Interwar foreign policy can be broadly divided into three key priorities: to maintain its status as the superpower of the era, to keep its newly further-enlarged empire secure, and to ensure the smooth flow of global trade and finance.[56] One of the most important tools available to the policy-makers in Whitehall in order to meet the demands of all three goals was the Royal Navy, in Greg Kennedy's words: 'Britain's most important diplomatic and military asset'.[57] The Royal Navy was key to the first of those foreign policy goals: maintaining superpower status. Since airpower was still in its infancy, the navy's position as the world's largest and most powerful sea-power force was therefore the ultimate guarantor of Great Britain's global status.[58]

Core to maintaining the British Empire's overall superpower status was the Royal Navy's battle fleet. As previously mentioned, there have been numerous studies about the development of the battle fleet during the 1920s, most of which are linked to the threat of an arms race between the main naval powers. John Jordan and Jon Sumida, for example, both provide technical accounts of the comparative capabilities of the major powers' vessels.[59] Similarly, Karl Lautenschläger and Arthur Hezlet consider the impact of newer military aircraft upon the relative strength of the major naval powers' fleets, both arguing that carrier based aircraft had limited value in the 1920s.[60] While those technical accounts

[56] Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower*, pp.116-140; Butler, Moore and Thomas, *Crises of Empire*, pp.18-19.
[57] Kennedy, 'Britain's Policy-Making Elite', 624.
[58] Bell, *The Royal Navy*, p.7; Karl Lautenschlaeger, 'Technology and the Evolution of Naval Warfare', *International Security* 8/2 (1983), 27; Jon T. Sumida, '"The Best Laid Plans": The Development of British Battle-Fleet Tactics, 1919-42', *International History Review* 14/4 (1992), 682; Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A guide for the twenty-first century*, (London: Routledge, 2013), p.231.
[59] John Jordan, *Warships After Washington: The Development of the Five Major Fleets 1922-1930*, (Barnsley: Seaforth, 2011); Sumida, '"The Best Laid Plans"', 681-691.
[60] Arthur Hezlet, *Aircraft and Sea Power*, (London: Davies, 1970); Lautenschlaeger, 'Technology and the Evolution of Naval Warfare', 3-51.

are of great value in discussions of major power conflict in the 1930s, the study of the battle fleet is of more limited value in direct regards to the 1920s. Designed and intended for decisive engagements against other naval powers, capital ships were of minimal use in dealing with the land based conflicts and confrontations that occurred in the earlier decade.[61] While larger vessels were prominent in the diplomatic wrangling over arms limitation treaties during the period, their practical military role was effectively limited to deterrent status.[62] Moreover, in line with the strategy first introduced by Lord Fisher to concentrate the battle fleet, few of the Royal Navy's major vessels were deployed outside of the North Atlantic or the Mediterranean in peacetime.[63] A notable exception was the global tour made by HMS *Hood* and the Special Service Squadron of 1923-1924, which was intended to impress upon both allies and potential enemies alike the scale of Great Britain's naval power.[64] The only real threat to Britain's superpower status was from the USA. Despite its rapid growth, however, the United States Navy (USN) still fell far short of the Royal Navy overall (although in some particular areas such as destroyers the USN was already dominant) and would not overtake it until the Second World War.[65]

A growing rivalry with the USA was not the only potential disruptive force to the global naval power balance. The collapse of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, with its official expiration in 1923, also contributed to growing concern about the emergent threat to the British Empire's East Asian territories. Worsening Anglo-Japanese relations in the 1920s have been a strong feature in Interwar historiography, which has focused on the direct long-term threat of war posed by an imperialist Japan, particularly after the Manchuria Crisis in 1931, and the fortification of Singapore to counter that perceived threat.[66] It was not until the 1930s that the threat from Japan became far more serious and the nominal power of the 1920s Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) relative to the Royal Navy and USN should not be overstated. Nonetheless, the expansion of the IJN during the First World War and its

[61] Joe A. Maiolo, 'Anglo-Soviet Naval Armaments Diplomacy before the Second World War', *The English Historical Review* 123/501 (2008), 353-357; Moretz, *The Royal Navy*, p.156.
[62] Kitching, *Britain and the problem of International Disarmament*, pp.2-10.
[63] Moretz, *The Royal Navy and the Capital Ship,* p.259; Till, *Seapower,* p.230.
[64] Ralph Harrington, ''The Mighty Hood': Navy, Empire, War at Sea and the British National Imagination, 1920-60', *Journal of Contemporary History* 38/2 (2003), 177.
[65] Chesneau, *All the World's Fighting Ships.*
[66] E.g. Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East*, pp.5-11; Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base*. Butler, 'The British Empire, 1918-1945', pp.18-21.

immediate aftermath had changed the global balance of power.[67] In particular, the launching of the two *Nagato*-class battleships (1919 & 1920), the aircraft carriers *Hosho*, *Agagi*, and *Kaga* (1919-1920), the six *Sendai*, *Yubari*, and *Furutaka*-class cruisers (1922), and 34 new submarines (1919-23), changed the Pacific naval equation to a significant extent.

The threat posed to the established world order by Japan's rise was highlighted by the effort placed into the 1922 Washington Treaty by Britain and the USA, to restrict the IJN, even if the limits were of little practical value.[68] Containing a range of restrictions on the number and size of various warships that each signatory was allowed to possess, in addition to a variety of additional clauses covering naval base enhancement among others, the treaty was intended to prevent a major arms race and curtail international rivalries. In the years following the Washington Conference, debates between the Admiralty and Cabinet show that despite caution about the threat posed by Japan to British colonies and the dominions of Australia and New Zealand, government ministers repeatedly dismissed it as a peripheral issue to the British Empire.[69] The British government felt safe in the belief that the IJN did not have the resources to achieve a decisive victory in East Asia, before the Royal Navy's battle fleet could reinforce the China Station.[70] This only started to change to a significant extent after General Tanaka Giichi's hawkish government was elected in Japan in 1927, with its expansionist attitude towards China.[71] There were concerns during the 1920s, however, within both the Admiralty and Foreign Office that Japan sought to lure Britain into a military response in China, as a means to facilitate a further expansion of Japan's commercial interests in the country.[72] While British officials were undoubtedly concerned about the direct long-term threat posed by Japan to the Empire as a whole, they were primarily wary of the indirect consequences of Japanese foreign policy in China.

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[67] Chesneau, *All the World's Fighting Ships*, pp.167-217; Jordan, *Warships After Washington*.
[68] Jordan, *Warships After Washington*, p.98.
[69] Admiralty reply to Cabinet about the Navy Estimates 1925-1926, February 1925, TNA, ADM 116/2300.
[70] W.S. Churchill, Memorandum by the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the Navy Estimates, 29 January 1925, TNA, CAB 24/171/39; M.P.A. Hankey, Note on Imperial Defence Preparations for Committee of Imperial Defence, 2 July 1928, TNA, CAB 24/196/32.
[71] Memoranda from Foreign Office officials in China on British Policy towards contending factions, October 1927, TNA, FO 228/3507/46; Fung, *The Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, p.158; Ian Nish, 'An Overview of Relations between China and Japan, 1895-1945', *China Quarterly* 124 (1990), 611-615.
[72] Harumi Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain in Shanghai 1925-31*, (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp.22-28; Field, *Royal Navy Strategy,* p.64.

The simultaneous growth in power of the USA and Japan, challenging Britain's complete global dominance, was not a significant strategic concern. In naval terms, Whitehall had already abandoned the 'two power standard' in 1911, whereby the Royal Navy was expected to be larger than the next two navies. Instead a 'one power standard' had been adopted, where Britain simply needed to maintain the world's single largest navy.[73] There are even some questions about the seriousness with which the Admiralty treated the one power standard, with suggestions in some documents that it was only seriously used during discussions with the Treasury and publically in Parliament.[74] Over the course of the 1920s the USN's growing strength also started to be regarded more widely around Whitehall as a positive development, given that neither nation really saw the other as a potential aggressor.[75] As a result, the other two major naval powers were growing stronger, but neither seriously threatened the British Empire's superpower status. Indeed, Bell has argued that when considering the Royal Navy's power in the 1920s against its potential enemies, i.e. not including the USA, Britain was no less dominant in global naval power than it had been before the First World War.[76] Likewise, recent economic assessments highlight that Britain maintained the highest level of military expenditure of any major power in the world during the 1920s, with its naval budget at a comparable level to the 1890-1910 period.[77] Maintaining Great Britain's prominent position may therefore have been a feature of the top-level diplomatic wrangling at various disarmament and naval conferences. Nonetheless, the Royal Navy's day to day concerns during the first half of the interwar period were

[73] Bell, *The Royal Navy*, p.2.
[74] W.S. Churchill, Memorandum by the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the Navy Estimates, 29 January 1925, TNA, CAB 24/171/39, p.6; M.P.A. Hankey, Minutes from a meeting of the Committee for Imperial Defence to discuss the Navy Estimates, 8 November 1928, TNA, CAB 24/198/48. It is clear from the minutes that attitudes in Whitehall to the one power standard were increasingly relaxed in the 1920s because of the largely theoretical threat posed by the USA in comparison to the very real threat that had been posed by Germany before the First World War.
[75] Much has been made of Plan Red, the theoretical study by the US to develop a strategy for a potential war with Great Britain, but such contingency planning is hardly surprising and there is general agreement that it was shelved after the demise of the Anglo-Japanese alliance. This in contrast to the serious treatment accorded to Plan Orange, originally drawn up in 1905, outlining the potential response to a conflict with Japan. See: Christopher M. Bell, 'Thinking the Unthinkable: British and American Naval Strategies for an Anglo-American War, 1918-1931', *International History Review* 19/4 (1997), 789-808, or Kenneth Clifford, *Amphibious warfare development in Britain and America from 1920 to 1940*, (New York: Edgewood, 1983), p.198.
[76] Bell, *The Royal Navy,* p.2.
[77] David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain 1920-1970,* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), pp.21-23.

focused upon the other two areas of imperial concern, maintaining the security of the Empire and protecting its arteries.[78]

Keeping the British Empire secure was no small challenge. One of the defining characteristics of the 1920s was the extent to which the Empire was over-stretched in a variety of ways. After obtaining stewardship of various territories after the First World War, primarily in the Middle-East, the British Empire had reached its peak size, covering twelve million square miles - roughly one quarter of the global land mass.[79] As a result, there were countless potential threats worldwide, both internal and external, to the maintenance of the status quo.[80] The war had also left Great Britain's economy drained, with a pressing need for the government to reduce expenditure, making the defence and maintenance of order in the Empire as much a challenge for accountants as admirals and generals.[81] At its most basic the Royal Navy was being asked to do more, while simultaneously making cutbacks and finding what would now be called 'efficiency savings'.[82]

These challenges provided a strong case for the Royal Navy to make structural, strategic and tactical changes, and where possible to adopt new technologies, although sometimes there was a reluctance among the Service's officers to do so. This thesis will focus upon the challenges facing the China Station and how they forced it to evolve over the period. However, top-down proposals and measures will also be considered, including the planned re-organisation of the Royal Marines, discussed by the Madden Committee in 1924, to turn the marines into a rapid response force.[83] The Madden Committee had been formed to conduct a review of the function and structure of the Royal Marines. The intention being to assess whether the functions of the Royal Marines could be fulfilled at a lower cost by the mainstream navy, or alternatively whether greater value could be secured from the existing

[78] Carolyn J. Kitching, *Britain and the Geneva Disarmament Conference*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp.11-15.
[79] Ronald Hyam, 'The British Empire in the Edwardian Era', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume IV: The Twentieth Century*, ed. by Judith Brown, William R. Louis, (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p.48.
[80] Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower*, pp.116-227.
[81] Derek H. Aldcroft, *From Versailles to Wall Street 1919-1929*, (London: Allen Lane, 1977), pp.100-104; Robin Higham, *Armed Forces in Peacetime*, (London: Foulis & Co., 1962).
[82] Butler, Moore and Thomas, *Crises of Empire*, p. 19; Hastings Ismay, *The Memoirs of Lord Ismay*, (London: Heineman, 1960), pp.50-56.
[83] C.E. Madden, 'Function and training of Royal Marines' commonly referred to as 'The Madden Report', 1924, TNA, ADM 1/8664/134; Donald F. Bittner, 'Britannia's Sheathed Sword: The Royal Marines and Amphibious Warfare in the Interwar Years - A Passive Response', *Journal of Military History* 55/3 (1991), 345-364.

structure. Ultimately the committee proposed the latter approach, to modernise and adapt the Royal Marines into fulfilling a rapid response role, allowing a few carefully located units around the Empire to settle swiftly the majority of threats to imperial stability. Kenneth Clifford suggested that while the committee's recommendations were dropped due to concerns about the up-front costs of such a reorganisation, the Royal Marines had nonetheless developed into the proposed force by the time of the 1927 crisis in China.[84] His conclusions have since been contested, however, by arguments that the 12th Battalion Royal Marines was formed and dispatched in the 'old way' to Shanghai in January 1927.[85] Exploring the events of that crisis in particular, this study will shed light on whether any progress had been made to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Navy in its role as an 'imperial gendarmerie' during the decade, and what the consequences were for the wider British Empire.

Many of the early and influential historical accounts of the Royal Navy during the period tended to outline how early interwar military thought was guided by what were felt to be the lessons of the preceding war.[86] Roskill, for example, stated that the only pro-active naval planning in the 1920s was intended to solve the problems encountered in the First World War, such as the development of Asdic to counter the submarine threat.[87] Later accounts have gone a little further to explore whether or not the Royal Navy learned any lessons from the First World War, but generally dismiss any developments from the 1920s.[88] This discussion has been strongly influenced by the background debate about the extent to which there was an institutional culture of anti-intellectualism within the interwar Navy.[89] Through its examination of the Service's peacetime frontline work in China, this thesis will add an entirely new element to this field by considering how willing officers were to adopt

[84] Clifford, *Amphibious warfare,* pp.18-19.
[85] War Diaries of 12th RMB on service in China, 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8709/102; Bittner, 'Britannia's Sheathed Sword', pp. 345-364; Julian Thompson, *The Royal Marines,* (London: Pan, 2000), p. 229.
[86] Basil Liddell-Hart, *The Liddell Hart Memoirs: Volume 1,* (London: Cassell, 1965).
[87] Roskill, *Naval policy between the wars,* pp.348-353. ASDIC: an early form of sonar device.
[88] Marder, 'The Influence of History on Sea Power', 414-428; Marder, *From the Dardanelles to Oran*, pp.34-38; David MacGregor, 'The Use, Misuse, and Non-Use of History: The Royal Navy and the Operational Lessons of the First World War', *Journal of Military History* 56/4 (1992), 603-616.
[89] Christopher M. Bell, 'The King's English and the Security of the Empire: Class, Social Mobility, and Democratization in the British Naval Officer Corps, 1918-1939', *Journal of British Studies* 48/3 (2009), 699; Mary Jones, 'Towards a Hierarchy of Management: The Victorian and Edwardian Navy 1860-1918' in *Naval Leadership and Management, 1650-1950*, ed. by Helen Doe and Richard Harding (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2012), p.167; Marder, 'The Influence of History on Sea Power', p.439.

new ideas and approaches in active service. In doing so, it will provide the other half of the picture to Moretz's recent work on the education of the Navy's officer corps, by looking at how some of those men behaved in practice.[90]

While not a focal point for the study, this thesis will take into account the background of inter-service rivalry during the period. Not all developments were necessarily as simple as they first may seem. The Admiralty not only had its battles with the Treasury and Cabinet over funding, and Foreign Office over strategy, but also with the other services, a period summed up concisely in Higham's *Armed Forces in Peacetime*.[91]In 1929, for example, a proposal was levelled by the Royal Air Force (RAF) to the Cabinet for flying boats to replace four Royal Navy sloops in the Persian Gulf, taking on their anti-piracy and slave trafficking tasks.[92] The logic presented to cabinet was that flying boats would be cheaper to operate than sloops. Such schemes, however, came as part of a long term campaign started by the first Marshal of the RAF, Hugh Trenchard, to secure a more prominent role for the fledgling RAF against the two long-established services.[93] Indeed, the displacement of conventional military capabilities with what was still novel air power began even before the First World War had ended. Air Vice-Marshall Sir Frederick Sykes argued this clearly in 1918, that the RAF would provide 'a rapid and economical instrument' for securing the Asian and African frontiers of the British Empire.[94] In addition to considering the significance of such frictions, this thesis will explore the extent to which the Navy found ways to prove its value to the British Empire, while simultaneously finding ways to improve the cost-effectiveness of its work against the challenge posed by the RAF.

Britain's China conundrum

The Xinhai Revolution was met with comparatively muted concern from Britain and other western nations. The events in 1911 represented a major shift in China's domestic political situation, but initially it was less significant for global events. For those foreign powers with

[90] Joseph Moretz, *Thinking Wisely, Planning Boldly: The Higher Education and Training of Royal Navy Officers, 1919-39*, (Solihull: Helion & Co., 2014).
[91] Higham, *Armed Forces in Peacetime*. See also: David R. Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals*, (London: Associated University Press, 1983); Roskill, *Naval policy between the wars*, pp.202-203; Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower,* p.19.
[92] H.M. Trenchard, Memorandum on The Fuller Employment of Air Power in Imperial Defence, November 1929, TNA, CAB 24/207.
[93] Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy Between the Wars*, pp.98-100.
[94] Keith Jeffrey, *The British Army and the Crisis of Empire 1918-22*, (Manchester: MUP, 1984), p.67.

interests in the country the revolution appeared similar, at least superficially, to earlier large scale rebellions, such as the Taiping Rebellion and Boxer Uprising.[95] With efforts in the mid-1910s to form a new republican government in China and little hostility directed against foreign powers, the Xinhai Revolution appeared a minor concern when compared with the events seen just over a decade earlier. During the Boxer Uprising, popular discontent in Northern China between 1897 and 1899 became increasingly focused against foreigners living in the region. That tension exploded into open conflict when a British-led multi-national military force attempted to reach Beijing in June 1900, which was seen as an invasion by the local population.[96] The subsequent humiliating terms imposed by the international coalition changed the path of Chinese politics. In contrast, the British establishment in 1911 agreed that as the revolution was not anti-foreign, the best course of action was to remain neutral and wait for order to be restored.[97]

The First World War soon distracted Britain and the other major powers, but the situation worsened in China with the failure of the Provisional Government and subsequent schism between the two main Beiyang (northern) and Guomindang (southern) regimes in 1917. Nonetheless, prior to the mid- 1920s the threat to British interests was relatively mild, mostly in the form of piracy and banditry, resulting from the lack of effective governance in many areas.[98] For the Royal Navy, this posed the challenge of trying to provide an effective policing presence over large areas where British shipping and communities were present. Not only did the China Station face global, top-down challenges in terms of cost-cutting and inter-service rivalry, but it was also required to meet the regional problem posed by piracy. The growing number and severity of attacks on merchant shipping threatened the smooth flow of trade in the region, which was so important to the economy of the wider British Empire.[99] China accounted for roughly 3% of total goods exports from Great Britain in the mid-1920s, making it a modest but valuable external market for British manufacturers,

[95] See: Stephen Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War,* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012) and Bickers, *The Scramble for China.*
[96] Bickers, *The Scramble for China,* pp.337.347.
[97] Kim Salkeld, 'Witness to the Revolution: Surgeon Lieutenant Bertram Bickford on the China Station 1910-12', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 51 (2011), 133.
[98] Report by Chiefs of Staff with attached correspondence on the history of piracy in Chinese waters, January 1929, TNA, CAB 24/202/24; Osterhammel, 'China', pp.648-651; Sheridan, *China in Disintegration*, pp.76-92.
[99] A.W. Flux, 'British Export Trade' *Economic Journal* 36/144 (1926), 552-556; Fung, *The Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, pp.50, 190-191.

although the links with the Empire as a whole were far greater. With those additional exports from Britain's colonies, the British Empire was still China's largest trading partner, despite growing competition from Japan and the USA.[100] Prior to the First World War British businesses and banks had also invested heavily in and around the treaty ports, backing the construction of railways for example. As the different factions and local warlords intermittently resorted to conflict, the violence potentially put the security of both their staff and the assets at risk.[101] Beyond the formal boundaries of the Empire, with only a small British Army presence in East Asia, the Royal Navy offered the primary source of direct protection.

As the years passed and the conflict continued to erupt in bursts, the Shanghai press in particular started to draw parallels between the Boxer Uprising and growing anti-foreign rhetoric, warning of potentially catastrophic violence.[102] The murder of foreign missionaries and their families in that earlier crisis and horrific accounts of how they were killed, often exaggerated, had been seared into the collective memories of the treaty ports' foreign populations. At first the fears of the British expatriate population were soothed by Royal Navy warship visits, but the situation became far worse after the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925. British-led policemen in Shanghai shot and killed twelve Chinese civilians, who had been protesting against the prior death of a Chinese factory worker.[103] As a result, Britain became the focus of anti-imperial sentiment in China, a process catalysed by the Shanghai Municipality Police's frequently heavy-handed approach to policing.[104] The situation worsened further in 1926, when the Guomindang launched its Northern Expedition towards the valuable treaty ports and strategic cities along the Yangtze.[105] Not only was there the risk of British persons and property suffering as collateral damage in the fighting, but the Guomindang was still linked to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) whose rhetoric was

[100] Osterhammel, 'Imperialism in Transition', p.261.
[101] Osterhammel, 'China', pp.654-657; Eric Teichman, *Affairs of China: A Survey of the Recent History and Present Circumstances of the Republic of China*, (London: Methuen, 1938), p.46.
[102] Nicholas R. Clifford, 'A Revolution is not a Tea Party: The "Shanghai Mind(s)" Reconsidered', *Pacific History Review* 59/4 (1990), 513.
[103] Bickers, *Empire Made Me*, pp.164-167; Fung, *The Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* pp.40-41.
[104] Robert C. Kagan, 'From Revolutionary Iconoclasm to National Revolution: Ch'en Tu-hsiu and the Chinese Communist Movement' in *China in the 1920s: Nationalism and Revolution*, ed. by F.G. Chan and Thomas H. Etzold (New York: F.Watts, 1976), p.69; Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order - Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires 1918-1940*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), pp.76-78; Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain in Shanghai*, pp.13-40.
[105] Hans J. Van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China 1925-1945*, (London: Routledge, 2003), pp.109-119.

profoundly anti-imperialist. [106] As a result, British officials believed that the threat was far more direct and so the China Station was tasked with a further challenge, to adjust its approach against the emergent and evolving threat of war. [107]

The link to the CCP meant that the China Station's localised challenge in dealing with the China's civil wars also fitted into the Royal Navy's and British Empire's general battle against communism.[108] A string of real and fictional scandals at home and abroad fuelled a fear that the newly formed Soviet Union was attempting to undermine the British Empire from 'Dublin to Peking'.[109] The effectiveness of a naval response to a localised incident in Shanghai, for example, was therefore felt to have a much wider potential impact upon the security of the British Empire. Examining the nature of the British response in 1926-27 will therefore provide insights into how the Royal Navy adapted to deal with the unconventional threats posed by anti-imperial violence in the post-First World War era. In doing so, the thesis will consider the extent to which the service appreciated the wider implications of its actions on the British Empire's informal outposts. It will also expand upon the brief and somewhat tentative assertion made by Greg Kennedy, that the rise of Chinese nationalism in the 1920s was key to defining the security of the British Empire in East Asia.[110] As a result, the thesis will place the events around the China Station in context, examining their significance in relation to the Royal Navy as a whole.

China was certainly not the only country where Britain's armed forces were tasked with protecting the extended interests of the Empire during the 1920s, with deployments to Archangelsk and Chanak earlier in the decade. Likewise, the emergence of Pan-Arab nationalism and Zionism posed significant threats to the stability of the not-so-carefully constructed Anglo-French mandated Middle East. In some cases the resulting violence far exceeded that seen in similar incidents in China.[111] The uprisings in Iraq against the award of

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[106] Bruce A. Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989*, (London: Routledge, 2001), p.168; Fung, *The Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, p.115; Van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China*, p.117.
[107] Michael G. Murdoch, 'Exploiting Anti-Imperialism: Popular Forces and Nation-State-Building during China's Northern Expedition, 1926-1927', *Modern China* 35/1 (2009), 69-73; Fung, *The Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, p.33.
[108] Fung, *The Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, p.9.
[109] Houshang Sabahi, *British Policy in Persia 1918-1925*, (London: Cass, 1990), p.63; Nigel West, *MASK: MI5's penetration of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, (London: Routledge, 2005), p.11.
[110] Kennedy, 'British Sea Power and imperial defence in the Far East', p.206.
[111] Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower*, pp.116-140.

the British mandate over the country in 1920, for example, resulted in the deaths of 426 British and Indian servicemen and over 8,000 'insurgents'.[112] Mark Mazower has argued, however, that what occurred in Iraq was, to some extent, exceptional in its severity when considered in a wider context, and that the British Empire generally attempted to follow a doctrine of minimum force.[113] While the use of such levels of lethal violence was relatively rare, threats of force were used and prepared more regularly. A large naval force was stationed at Malta in 1925, for example, when Mosul province was awarded by the League of Nations to the British mandate in Iraq.[114] As this thesis will show, however, events in China resulted in the deployment of a far more significant force, providing an excellent insight into how the Royal Navy changed over the decade and responded to threats to the British Empire.

What occurred in China was not shaped by grand strategy between major powers, or the residual impact of the First World War, but by domestic changes as some warlord groups attempted to build a new China and others acted simply for personal gain. It therefore tested the Royal Navy's ability to react to unforeseen circumstances, where it was difficult to form a pro-active strategy given the lack of clearly defined opponents and allies, and obvious strategies that could be countered. Examining a reactionary scenario, such as the one in China, is therefore more likely to provide an insight into whether the Royal Navy had developed its capability for responding to and securing the British Empire against potential threats pitted against it.

Not only did the events of the mid-1920s pose a challenge in response to which the China Station needed to adapt, but it added to the global picture of pressure upon the Royal Navy's stretched finances. The First World War had been a severe drain on Britain's coffers. Indeed, the burden of debt interest payments alone had rocketed from £16.7m (9.6% of budget receipts) pre-war, to £308.7m (22.4%) in 1920-21.[115] Earlier historical accounts tended to emphasise the significance of the resulting swathing cutbacks to Britain's defence

[112] David K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958,* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p.87.
[113] Mark Mazower, 'Violence and the State in the Twentieth Century', *American Historical Review* 107/4 (2002), 1175.
[114] Peter Elliot, *The Cross and the Ensign: A Naval History of Malta 1798-1979*, (London: Granada, 1982), pp.100-101.
[115] Martin Daunton, 'How to Pay for the War: State, Society and Taxation in Britain, 1917-1924', *English Historical Review* 111/443 (1996), 883.

budget after the First World War, particularly through the 'Geddes Axe' – a planned reduction in public expenditure chaired by Sir Eric Geddes.[116] Over the years this has been tempered, however, with a better understanding that while there were significant cutbacks, they were designed to reduce the exceptionally high wartime levels and Britain maintained the largest defence budget in the world throughout the 1920s.[117] Nonetheless, the cutbacks did occur and amid inflationary stresses the Navy had greater financial concerns than it had done in many years.

It was against that background that the Admiralty came under sustained pressure from the Foreign Office to boost its resources on China's waterways.[118] As a result, the Admiralty decided to finance the construction of four new gunboats and a further four motor boats purpose-built for use on the Yangtze from the 1925-1926 estimate, when finances were increasingly tight for the Royal Navy.[119] While the total construction cost for these boats of £81,000 was hardly extraordinary in comparison to a capital ship, it represented a noteworthy level of expenditure on such a specific element for defending the British Empire's wider interests. It was also made at a point when the Admiralty had to justify even the £1,600 bill for new motor boats for Singapore in direct correspondence with the Chancellor of the Exchequer.[120]

The Foreign Office's concerns about the Royal Navy's capabilities on the China Station ranged from the basic monetary concern about losing an export market worth over £12 million a year, to the growing rivalry with former ally Japan.[121] There were also broader concerns about what impact the way in which Britain responded to the situation in China

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[116] E.g. Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment: The dilemma of British defence policy in the era of the two world wars*, (London: Ashfield, 1989), pp.84-89; Paul Kennedy, *The Realities Behind Diplomacy: Background Influences on British External Policy, 1865-1980,* (London: Fontana, 1985), pp.226-242; Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars,* p.276.

[117] Christopher M. Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), pp.88-105; John Ferris, 'Treasury Control, The Ten Year Rule and British Service Policies, 1919-1924' *Historical Journal* 30/4 (1987), 860-867; Jon T. Sumida, 'British Naval Procurement and Technological Change, 1919-1939', in *Technology and Naval Combat in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, ed. by Philip P. O'Brien (London: Routledge, 2001), pp.129-134; Edgerton, *Warfare State*, pp.16-36.

[118] W.C. Bridgeman, Appendix for the Navy Estimates for 1925-1926, TNA, CAB 24/171/38.

[119] 2x 'Tern' and 2x 'Peterel' class river gunboats, launched 1927-1928. These were to be followed shortly afterwards by a further three (*Falcon, Sandpiper, and Robin)* during the period 1931-1934. Chesneau, *All the World's Fighting Ships*, p.78.

[120] Admiralty correspondence with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the Navy Estimates, 1928, TNA, ADM 1/8724/68.

[121] Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain in Shanghai*, p.54.

would have upon the perception of the power of the British Empire among its colonial populations. The protests against the British presence in Shanghai were felt to be intrinsically linked to similar protests in Singapore, for example.[122] This was to directly impact the work of the Royal Navy, with the cruiser HMS *Dauntless* being held at Singapore in early 1927, awaiting the arrival of the Shanghai Defence Force at its destination, in order to make a visible statement about British power in the region.[123] Within the Foreign Office discussion of the decision to retain *Dauntless* there is clear concern that protests in China could easily spread to Singapore and then Malaysia, and was therefore a significant threat to the safety and integrity of the British Empire as a whole.

Chapter outlines

The China Station was the Royal Navy's largest commitment outside of Europe, whose core task was to mitigate the threats posed to Britain's interests in China. This thesis will examine the Royal Navy's day-to-day work in China's littoral regions, in order to provide new insights into the interwar Navy, and how it went about policing and defending the furthermost outposts of the British Empire. Bringing together various themes, the thesis will consider what impact the challenges and changes affecting the China Station in the 1920s had upon Britain's foreign policy and the Royal Navy's strategy for dealing with the full range of threats to the British Empire.

The first chapter will tie together the two established, but currently separate, themes in the existing historiography of Britain's position in Interwar Asia; the turning point for Britain's informal empire in China, and the shift to the 'Singapore Strategy'. After the First World War the Admiralty chose to retain its gunboat force on the Chinese coast, and a string of naval bases to support them, despite significant pressures on the naval budget. This chapter will therefore, in part, consider what relationship those resources had to the wider strategic concerns about defending against Japanese expansion in the region, and the threat that posed to British imperial interests. In doing so, it will show the key inter-relationship between Britain's strategy for China and its corresponding one for Japan, particularly in terms of the viability of defending Hong Kong during the first half of the interwar period.

[122] Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, pp.76-78.
[123] Foreign Office request to the Admiralty for the stationing of HMS *Dauntless* at Singapore, December 1926, TNA, FCO 141/16373.

Many of the challenges faced by the Royal Navy in peacetime along China's coastline and rivers were also dilemmas for the other major powers operating in the region, as well as for China's local and regional authorities. With almost all the main countries affected having worked together previously as allies during the First World War, continued cooperation in peacetime could prove beneficial for all concerned. This section will focus on the China Station's interactions with America's Asiatic Fleet and Japan's First Expeditionary Fleet. While the problems faced by the three powers were often identical, government policy frequently dictated different responses. However, this thesis will show how service personnel in East Asia sometimes interacted in contrast, rather than in parallel, to those at the top-level. In doing so, it will examine what frontline cooperation occurred and why naval personnel sometimes chose to go against their nation's official policies. It should not be assumed that officers, trained in following orders, always acted obediently and exactly in line with their instructions. This is all crucial in order understand more precisely the role of navies in interwar international relations, when they often served as extensions of their nations' diplomatic corps. The conduct of naval officers on deployment could shape foreign policy and define how countries were perceived worldwide.

With that strategic position established, the second chapter will then consider the China Station's peacetime role in interwar British foreign policy, along with the challenges posed by the revolution and subsequent civil wars in China. It will look at what Britain sought to influence, control, and protect, and how those priorities translated into requirements for the Royal Navy. The lightweight sloops and gunboats that formed two thirds of the China Station's standing force were clearly not there to counter the IJN, which regularly sent battlecruisers and cruisers on tours of the Chinese ports.[124] The peacetime work against piracy and banditry, and the efforts to keep Britain's imperial outposts in China secure during a period of turmoil, must therefore be considered to fully understand the development of Britain's naval presence in East Asia. The second chapter will provide the context as to why so many local defence vessels were posted to China and how that force evolved over the 1920s. In particular, it will outline how the piracy problem was a relatively

[124] As noted in the ship's log of HMS *Diomede* 1924-1925, TNA, ADM 53/75887 and ship's log of HMS *Hawkins* 1923-1924, TNA, ADM 53/78593.

new one, and how the Royal Navy attempted to work with both British imperial and Chinese authorities in dealing with it.

The second chapter will then go on to examine how the evolving crisis in China from 1925 pushed the Navy's stretched resources to breaking point. What happened in and around Shanghai in 1927 may feature heavily in histories of the British Empire's relationship with China, but it also triggered the most significant peacetime deployment of naval power by the Admiralty in the entire interwar period. This will address the near-complete absence of that task force from the existing naval historiography, putting events into greater context, and taking another step further away from the 'Road to 1939' narrative of interwar developments. The chapter will then move on to show why the events in China were considered important enough to elicit such a pronounced response, both in their own rights and against a background fear in Whitehall of a global Soviet plot to undermine the British Empire.

With the 1920s Royal Navy required to respond to those challenges, the third chapter will examine the operational impact of new technology on the China Station, as one source of solutions to the emergent problems. The development of wireless communication, faster vessels, and effective military aircraft provided the potential to transform the way in which the post-First World War Navy went about its role in supporting the British Empire. Technology played an important role in reinforcing the international prestige of both the Navy and the wider British Empire. Research on military innovation during the interwar period has frequently focused upon major power conflicts, to the neglect of its role in 'little wars' and peace, which is something this chapter will address.[125]

This chapter will examine the adoption and use of new technology on the China Station during the 1920s, in three key areas. Firstly, it will consider the role technology played during the decade in reinforcing imperial prestige, 'waving the flag', as a means of strengthening Britain's influence in the region. Secondly, exploring the roll-out of wireless equipment, for example, the chapter will consider how technology affected the Navy's ability to both understand and control how its warships went about their peacetime work at

[125] E.g. Sumida, 'British Naval Procurement', pp.129-143; Lautenschlaeger, 'Technology and the Evolution of Naval Warfare', 3-51; Watts and Murray, 'Military Innovation in Peacetime', pp.371-373.

the periphery of empire.[126] In doing so, it will also consider to what extent the outcomes were intentional, as a result of deliberate efforts by the Royal Navy to address the challenges it faced in East Asia. HMS *Hermes'* deployment will be assessed as a part of this, exploring how public explanations for sending Britain's first purpose-built aircraft carrier to China did not match the Admiralty's secret motivation. Events in China played an important role in providing an excuse to contravene the terms of the Washington Treaty, with the findings of great significance to existing discussions about the later 'Allied' nations' attitudes towards the Treaty. Finally, the bombardments conducted by British warships at Wanxian (Wanhsien) and Nanjing (Nanking) will be assessed from a technical perspective. Those events were pivotal moments in Britain's relationship with China, but so far no-one has attempted objectively to weigh the wildly different casualty estimates or to consider the wider naval factors behind the outcomes. This may not change our understanding of the outcomes of those events, but it will provide significantly greater depth to our knowledge of what happened and why.

The fourth chapter will go beyond technology and finance to consider the human factor and how willingly naval officers adopted new tactics and ideas. The chapter will consider three key questions: Did the China Station display any indication of pro-actively adopting new ideas and tactics? What impact did the presence of new ideas, or continued use of outdated approaches, have on the work done by the China Station? Lastly, were the tactics used selected by junior officers in the course of their work, the Commander in Chief of the China Station, or were they imposed by the Admiralty? The chapter will therefore feed into the existing discussion both of anti-intellectualism in the Royal Navy and Nicholas Lambert's argument about the speed with which centralised command and control was adopted.[127]

A key feature of that discussion will be a review of when the Royal Navy's attitude towards using Victorian 'gunboat diplomacy' tactics in China changed and how. This chapter will give an indication of the extent to which the Austen Chamberlain's 1926 December Memorandum influenced the China Station's operating procedures, and so how tangible the link was between changing diplomatic and military approaches to China. In doing so, it will

[126] Daniel R. Headrick and Pascal Griset, 'Submarine Telegraph Cables: Business and Politics, 1838-1939', *Business History Review* 75/3 (2001), 573-574.
[127] Lambert, 'Strategic Control', 362; Marder, *From the Dardanelles to Oran*, pp.34-38. Marder, 'The Influence of History on Sea Power', 413-443. See also: Bell, 'The King's English', 685-716; Kier, *Imagining War*, p.149.

look at the three different levels involved – the Foreign Office, the Royal Navy's senior command, and those junior officers on the scene. While many imperial histories treat the Royal Navy as a uniform entity, there was considerable variety in officers' attitudes and behaviour, influenced by human and institutional factors. This chapter will then go on to explore the surge in the number of officers who arrived on the scene in 1927 and the significance they had upon events. The introduction of so many ship captains who were unused to the local circumstances, and who had minimal knowledge of Britain's strategy for China, was highly influential in the outcome of key events and is one that has previously been overlooked.

In making these assessments, the main source of official files has been The National Archives at Kew, particularly those from the Admiralty, Cabinet, Foreign Office, and War Office. Along with Hansard, those files play a vital role in establishing the official accounts of the British government and Royal Navy, as well as revealing the discussions behind those top-level decisions. As this thesis is intended to examine what was happening on the scene in East Asia, however, and those files tend to only provide an official, British narrative and view of global developments, a much wider selection of source material has been examined. This has been particularly important when dealing with controversial events, such as the Nanjing Incident, where officers appear to have been less inclined to discuss aspects that did not reflect well on the Royal Navy or British government, or might prove overly damaging to an officer's career.

To provide that broader picture, this thesis makes considerable use of the private papers – including diaries, letters, memoirs, and photographs – belonging to a range of individuals present in China during the 1920s. To get the granularity of detail about specific decisions, attitudes, and events, as well as gauge to the wider feeling among the fleet's personnel, a concerted effort has been made to use a wide variety of accounts. These have come from several different archives: The National Museum of the Royal Navy and Royal Marine Museum in Portsmouth; the special collections held by King's College London, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Leeds University, and the National Maritime Museum. The Imperial War Museum in London, however, has been particularly important both given the depth of the resources available, but also as its Oral History series enables the historian to actually hear the voices of the past and get a better sense of an individual's feelings.

While examining all these accounts, this thesis has taken a spread from across all naval ranks from Boy Seamen to Admiral of the Fleet, as well as those of civilians living and working in the region. That variety has demonstrated the significant differences of opinion held by various naval officers, at times, and how that affected key decisions. The ADM 196 series of Admiralty personnel files held at The National Archives played an important role in these assessments, by providing background aptitudes and attitudes of the officers whose views and actions were being considered.

There have been frequent incidences where information in official files has not completely tallied with that in private papers, or vice versa, where it has been necessary to look to alternative sources for verification. The China Station's ships logs - ADM 53 series – held at The National Archives has been one such example, providing basic but often vital details about each ship's day-to-day duties and how they responded at times of crisis. Newspaper archives have also played an important role, along with photograph collections, in providing the general colour of what key groups felt or were doing. There have been cases where the accuracy of the newspapers, particularly those produced in Britain's imperial outposts, has been decidedly questionable. Where newspaper articles have made false and exaggerated claims exceeding those of even irascible naval officers defending their reputations, such as Captain Hugh England, it has further supported arguments by Robert Bickers' and Nicholas Clifford about the extreme attitudes of Britain's 'Spoilt Children of Empire'.[128]

The defence of Britain's expatriate population in China was a core role for the Royal Navy, and so the interactions between the two required studying from both perspectives. A key source of that correspondence has been the council papers of Shanghai's International Settlement, held by the Shanghai Municipal Archives. Along with the files of the China Association held at SOAS, these have never previously been reviewed by a naval or military historian and provide a range of insights about how the defence of informal Empire actually operated. From revealing the pressure placed upon the Navy's officers as pseudo-diplomats in addressing the concerns of those expatriate populations, to the effectiveness of the various Treaty Port volunteer corps, these are entirely new details to the field. Where

[128] Robert Bickers, 'Shanghailanders: The Formation and Identity of the British Settler Community in Shanghai 1843-1937', *Past and Present* 159 (1998), 199; Nicholas R. Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire: Westerners in Shanghai and the Chinese Revolution of the 1920s*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1991), p.161.

possible, efforts have been made to utilise non-British sources to add to this wider perspective, particularly through American and French accounts. Gaining access to and translating Chinese accounts from the period has proven problematic, in practical terms, and so the thesis relies heavily on the works of other historians to provide that perspective. It has been possible, however, to obtain valuable new insights into Chinese, Japanese, and Dutch viewpoints through the use of the Government Code and Cypher School decrypted files in the National Archives' HW 12 series.

Chapter One: Between China and Japan, the China Station's strategic balance

An exploration of the Royal Navy's China Station and its main deployments during the 1920s should consider how those operational demands were balanced against wider strategic concerns. There are already many histories about the nature of Britain's interwar relationship with Japan and how the China Station was positioned to counter Japan's growing power in the region.[1] That historiography examines the gradually worsening ties as the two countries moved slowly towards the ultimate clash during the Second World War. Few accounts, however, consider the naval and geo-political implications of Britain's changing involvement in China and the inter-relationship between the various power struggles occurring in East Asia at the time. In discussing Hong Kong's position within the Royal Navy's long term planning, for example, even Bell's broader approach to the topic did not explore the extent to which maintaining that naval base had to do with neighbouring China.[2] This chapter will avoid delving too far into existing debates about the shift towards a Singapore-focused grand strategy, but will add to the discussion over why Britain maintained a modest force at such a relatively exposed outpost. In particular, it will look to explore how events involving the second-tier powers influenced the grand strategies of the major powers, bringing together the often-detached realms of imperial and naval history. Some of the key events involving the 1920s China Station, which will be explored in greater detail during later chapters, will be also placed in context, identifying their significance in wider regional developments.

There are four broad areas that will be explored to consider fully China and the China Station's position within the 1920s East Asian naval power struggles. Firstly, the nature, disposition, and operational employment of the China Station will be examined, looking at what it was intended to achieve in relation to the two regional rivals. Secondly, Britain's changing strategy for maintaining bases in the region, which has been a feature of existing discussion, will be expanded to explore their role in relation to China, including the often-overlooked withdrawal from Weihai. Thirdly, the chapter will explore the degree of

[1] E.g. John Ferris, 'The Last Decade of British Maritime Supremacy: 1919-1929', in *Far Flung Lines*, ed. by Keith Neilson and Greg Kennedy (London: Cass, 1996); Bell, 'The "Singapore Strategy" and the Deterrence of Japan'; Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East;* Marder, 'The Influence of History on Sea Power'.
[2] Bell, 'Our Most Exposed Outpost', 61-88; Bell, 'How are we going to make war?', 123-141.

cooperation and conflict that occurred between Britain, China, Japan, and the other European powers with interests in the region. Lastly, it will be considered what role America played as a rising influence over regional events and the extent to which Anglo-American naval interactions around China influenced Britain's East Asian strategy. Together the four sections will provide more depth to the existing understanding of Britain's interwar plans for East Asia, and how naval strategy was influenced by concerns about China as well as Japan. In doing so, the chapter will delineate between Britain's Far Eastern strategy and Anglo-Japanese relations, to treat events in the 1920s in context rather than with the hindrance of hindsight about what happened in 1941.

The geo-strategic environment

Britain's diplomatic relationship with Asia's two main powers, China and Japan, developed during the latter part of the nineteenth century along quite different lines. Whereas there remained a degree of official intransigence and sometimes outright hostility between Britain and China, events with Japan slowly moved towards the signing of the Anglo-Japanese Treaty in 1902. That alliance, however, was in reality little more than a marriage of convenience and gives a false impression about the strength of the bond between the two countries. Britain faced the conflicting aims of wanting to keep its East Asian interests secure, while simultaneously concentrating the Royal Navy's power in and around European waters to mitigate worsening ties with Germany.[3] In return, Japan sought a powerful ally to help strengthen its hand against Russia, particularly by removing the threat of third-party interference from France or Italy.[4]

Almost before the ink was dry, the global power balance was shifting to undermine the common perceived threats that lay at the heart of the alliance. Beginning with Japan's victory over Russia in 1905, the temporary incentives binding Japan and Britain together started to dissipate. The complete naval victory gained at Tsushima by the IJN eliminated what was previously the second largest naval force in East Asia, after the Royal Navy, and with it cemented Japan's position as a serious regional power.[5] Germany's East Asian Cruiser

[3] O'Brien, 'The Titan Refreshed', 149-153.
[4] Yoichi Hirama, 'The First World War and Japan: From the Anglo-Japanese Alliance to the Washington Treaty', *The Sea In History: The Modern World*, ed. by N.A.M. Rodger (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), p.413.
[5] Kwong Chi Man, Tsoi Yiu Lun, *Eastern Fortress: A Military History of Hong Kong 1840-1970*, (Hong Kong: HKUP, 2014), p.36.

Squadron would eventually fill the gulf left by Russia as a prominent third naval power in the region, but only really in 1914 during the march to war.[6] More immediately, the complete victory at Tsushima triggered growing concern within the British establishment about Japan itself. That debate was stoked by the sudden realisation that Japan had emerged as a growing military power, but much of the fuel came from a deep underlying racial distrust of the Japanese in general. As early as 1909, for example, reports of Japanese agents operating in the Xinjiang province of China provoked near-paranoia among British officials, concerned about a threat to the northern border of India.[7] While with hindsight it seems unlikely those agents, if indeed they actually were spies, might have been exploring invasion routes, the incident serves to highlight British suspicion about Japan's strategic plans. Britain did not expect the Anglo-Japanese Alliance to be a permanent arrangement.[8]

The alliance survived into the First World War as situations still arose where it proved invaluable to both nations, particularly in China where their interests overlapped. Throughout the Wuchang Uprising, forming the first months of the Xinhai Revolution, the two navies cooperated to protect their interests in the treaty ports from riot damage. While that mutual assistance was not extended without reservations, it occurred against a backdrop where the various foreign powers in China were generally not on cordial terms. Compared with the alternative potential allies, continued Anglo-Japanese cooperation remained the preferred choice. In contrast, German officials were reportedly extremely antagonistic in their attitude towards other nations' navies, above all in their dealings with the Imperial Japanese Navy. That hostility led to one situation in 1911 that serves well to show how the Anglo-Japanese alliance remained relevant to both parties.

During times of trouble in such remote locations, even when cooperation between different navies was conducted reluctantly, it was generally accepted that rank would be mutually respected, and the highest-ranking officer present would lead the multinational response. When Vice-Admiral Alfred Winsloe prepared to leave Hankou, which would involve his relinquishing command as the senior international naval officer present, the Japanese

[6] Overlack, 'The Force of Circumstance', 661.
[7] Max Everest-Phillips, 'The Pre-War Fear of Japanese Espionage: Its Impact and Legacy', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 42/2 (2007), 251.
[8] Kwong Chi Man, 'Anglo-Japanese Alliance, the First World War, and the Defence of Hong Kong: The Emergence of the First Landward Defence Line in Hong Kong, 1898-1918', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 54, (2014), 15.

ambassador in London lobbied the British government to instruct Winsloe to remain in place. Had he departed as planned then the next in line to take command was a German officer, a possibility that the Japanese found intolerable. After due consideration, the Admiralty ordered Winsloe to remain at Hankou a little longer in acquiescence to the Japanese request.[9] That decision was aided by British suspicions that German officers had hidden agendas, given reports at the time that Germany was training Chinese soldiers. In such situations, both allies worked willingly together in China, although perhaps with a sense of resignation that it was due to a lack of viable alternatives rather than an ideal union.

The First World War ultimately steered the uncertain alliance on its course towards complete collapse, starting with the very first month of the conflict. Japan's government hesitated almost three weeks, after German troops entered Belgium triggering Britain's entry into the European conflict, before finally declaring war. That delay caused significant friction with the British government, because it was perceived as Japan failing to honour the spirit of the alliance.[10] In return, the British government formally notified Japan in 1914 that an agreement had been signed with the USA making it unlikely that Britain would join a conflict between the two Pacific powers.[11] Nonetheless, the biggest influence upon Anglo-Japanese relations as a result of the war was an indirect one, heavily linked to China.

Expanding Japanese economic activity in China, particularly in the Yangtze valley, was already causing friction between the allies when war broke out in 1914.[12] The British Empire's dominance over trade with China had declined from a peak of 80% in the 1870s to just under 50% by 1913, but faced further fierce competition during the war years. [13] As Britain's resources were increasingly focused on the war effort, Japanese businesses were free to step into the resulting trading void, accelerating the pace of the existing trend. This was part of a much wider picture in which British dominance of global merchandise exports was generally waning, with its market share almost cut by half between 1870 and 1929. While the USA played the primary role in that decline, the displacement of British trade by

[9] Salkeld, 'Witness to the Revolution', 120-135.
[10] Hirama, 'The First World War and Japan', p.415.
[11] Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power,* (Gloucester: Sutton, 1984), p.252.
[12] Robert J. Gowen, 'Great Britain and the Twenty-One Demands of 1915: Cooperation versus Effacement' *Journal of Modern History*, 43/1 (1971), 82.
[13] Fung, *The Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, p.5; Osterhammel, 'China', pp.644-646.

Japanese businesses was particularly pronounced in China. Between 1872 and 1921, for example, Japan was the single largest source of foreign direct investment into Shanghai.[14]

In conjunction with that economic challenge, the war also increased the relative growth in Japan's military and diplomatic hard power. In roughly twenty-five years, Japan had gone from having a navy barely worthy of note to creating a force capable of causing significant damage to the Royal Navy, and with it Britain's position in East Asia.[15] As a result, background suspicion started to solidify into official caution, with intelligence-sharing and joint-planning with Japan cut to a minimum by the end of the war.[16] This was not purely a British attitude towards its Asian ally, with Japan also increasingly wary of its European counterpart and taking similar steps to limit its collaboration.[17]

What was occurring during this period, however, was not just a one-way process of Britain becoming suspicious of their nominal ally. Britain's temporary wartime alliance with Japan's main regional rival, America, had highlighted the degree to which Anglo-American defence interests overlapped, and how well their forces could work together. Just as Japan had become a potential threat to Britain's interests, it looked increasingly likely that Britain would side with America in a Pacific conflict. Indeed, Japanese suspicions about the latter scenario were quite close to the truth. Even before its official expiration in 1921, the Admiralty had already issued orders stating that in the event of war between America and Japan, the China Station was to ignore the alliance and prepare to assist America.[18] There were factors at play in the final few years, particularly after David Beatty's appointment as First Sea Lord, which pushed the relationship between Britain and Japan into rapid decline.[19] Japanese commentary on the Indian independence movement in 1919, for example, in response to Britain's heavy-handed policies on the sub-continent was interpreted as an

[14] Wolfgang Keller, Ben Li, and Carol H. Shiue, 'Shanghai's Trade, China's Growth: Continuity, Recovery, and Change since the Opium Wars' *IMF Economic Review* 61/2 (2013), 347-352.
[15] Bell, *The Royal Navy,* p.63.
[16] Man, 'Anglo-Japanese Alliance', p.25.
[17] Yoshio Aizawa, 'The Path Towards an 'Anti-British Strategy by the Japanese Navy between the Wars', in *The history of Anglo-Japanese relations, 1600-2000; Volume III: The Military Dimension*, ed. by Ian Gow, Yoichi Hirama, John Chapman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.139.
[18] Memorandum titled: War Standing Instructions for the Guidance of Commander-in-Chief Abroad and Senior Officers in Command of Foreign Stations, 12 January 1920, TNA, ADM 116/3124.
[19] Ian Gow, 'The Royal Navy and Japan, 1921-1941', in *The history of Anglo-Japanese relations, 1600-2000; Volume III: The Military Dimension*, ed. by Ian Gow, Yoichi Hirama, John Chapman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.109.

effort to undermine the British Empire.[20] The collapse, however, had been long in coming and was not just a result of Beatty triggering a sudden reassessment, within the Admiralty, of the potential threat posed by Japan. Entering the 1920s, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was still in place, but the treaty was largely worthless and in practicality the two countries had long regarded each-other with suspicion as potential threats.

Looking at East Asia in 1919, British officials would have seen a region dominated by recent wartime allies, but few of whom could be counted on as true friendly states. The marriage of convenience with Japan was approaching a potentially acrimonious divorce. America was returning to its previous international isolation, while simultaneously challenging Britain economically, militarily, and geo-politically worldwide. France, the Netherlands, and Portugal were seen as supportive powers, although they were no longer in a position materially to assist Britain in East Asia. Russia had new Soviet leadership and presented an apparently existential threat to the British Empire. Britain's response to the heated environment in China, and the challenges posed by the leading Chinese factions, had to be weighed against that new geo-strategic background.

The right warships in the right places?

In 1904 the Commander-in-Chief of the China Station, Admiral Cyprian Bridge, wrote to the Admiralty arguing for a radical change to the structure and operational deployment of his force. Within his argument he stated that the China Station was actually split into two very different squadrons, one of gunboats and one true naval fleet. Bridge proposed retiring his gunboat force, given that he felt they were maintained for political purposes and had little military value.[21] The request was denied by the Admiralty, but it does serve to highlight one of the long-standing unusual features of the China Station – it was not really a single command. While the precise dispositions had changed since Bridge's time, particularly during the First World War interlude, entering the 1920s the situation was very similar to that in 1904.[22] The China Station was still split between ocean-going vessels intended for battle at sea against other major powers, such as America or Japan, and a brown-water force of smaller warships for littoral operations.

[20] Hirama, 'The First World War and Japan', p.418.
[21] Lindgren, 'A station in transition', 467-473.
[22] Navy List, December 1920, NLS, p.714.

Possessing a mixture of vessel types was not unusual in itself for a naval station, but the China Station's size and split between fleet and patrol vessels does make it stand out, as the challenges it faced exceeded those at most other locations. The Africa and East Indies stations, for example, had both cruisers to protect trade routes and smaller sloops for counter-piracy and other naval policing work. In practice, however, the handful of warships posted to most naval stations around the world were only sufficient to deter lone mid-sized raiders, should war break out.[23] In contrast, the China Station was the third largest global deployment of Royal Navy warships, even if it was still relatively lightweight when compared with the fleets in home waters and the Mediterranean.

While the cruisers and submarines posted to China were nominally there to deter Japanese aggression, the force was still relatively small and exposed if truly intended to achieve that goal. The world's third largest navy was based only a few days sailing away from Hong Kong. That position has previously been explained through exploring the expectation in Whitehall, prior to 1931, that Britain would potentially have had thirty to sixty days warning in which to prepare for war with Japan.[24] Even three weeks would have provided sufficient time to despatch a task force from Malta, although war orders stated that the fleet would only initially sail as far as Singapore.[25] Built around a squadron of *Iron Duke* class battleships at first, that relief force could potentially rendezvous with the China Station in the vicinity of Hong Kong within a week of leaving Singapore.[26] The full battle fleet was expected to be able to join from home waters in the following two weeks, providing an overwhelming naval force at Hong Kong within a maximum of 54 days of being ordered to sail by the Admiralty.[27] Once the fleet controlled the South China Sea, securing British imperial territory, the Navy's cruisers would begin a campaign of attrition, which it was hoped would slowly force Japan

[23] Navy List, December 1920, NLS, pp.710-716.
[24] Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East*, p.11.
[25] Admiralty to Atlantic Fleet commander, 4 January 1923, TNA, ADM 116/3124; War Memoranda for the Far East, November 1932, TNA, ADM 116/3118. There was a brief exception to this rule, between November 1932 and April 1933, when the Admiralty succumbed to lobbying from the China Station and ordered that the battle fleet should proceed straight to Hong Kong after re-fuelling at Singapore. The amendment was quickly rescinded, however, after further discussion at the Admiralty.
[26] E.g. Ship's log of HMS *Hermes* 1926, TNA, ADM 53/78830; Ship's log of HMS *Diomede* 1924-25, TNA, ADM 53/75887. Sailing by itself and with urgency at nineteen knots, *Hermes* managed the journey in three days in 1926, showing what was possible. A battle fleet led by the slower moving Iron Dukes, however, was expected to take up to a week in bad weather.
[27] Memoranda by Admiral Charles Madden as Director of Planning, 3 February 1928, TNA, ADM 116/3126; War Memoranda for the Far East, November 1932, TNA, ADM 116/3118.

to seek a settlement.[28] In the following six weeks, two infantry divisions would also arrive ready for deployment in and around Hong Kong, assuming it had survived any initial Japanese assault.[29]

Even in the early 1920s four to eight weeks represented a significant lag, during which time the China Station would have been exposed to attack from Japan. Most explanations so far have focused on the submarines present at Hong Kong, suggesting that they could, or were at least expected to be able to, delay any Japanese advance across East Asia during the critical first two months of a conflict.[30] These fit with the plans for the station's cruisers and light vessels to harry the Japanese advance, while falling back upon Singapore.[31] Likewise, Joseph Moretz has discussed a theoretical study from 1921 looking at a Japanese assault on Hong Kong via landings in Mirs Bay, which suggested that the city might be able to hold out for a couple of months, although it was ultimately inconclusive over the final result.[32] With such a delay, the balance of global naval power was still in Britain's favour during the 1920s.[33] It has been proposed that the focus on enforcing global naval disarmament treaties was felt by Whitehall to keep a lid on Japanese naval development, to ensure a British naval task force to East Asia would be dominant for the foreseeable future.[34] These points do provide a solid basis for understanding Britain's grand strategy for dealing with Japan, but all assume either complacency or a cold detachment in the Admiralty's leaving its third largest force, and associated ground forces, exposed to destruction before help could arrive. That risk was all the greater when considering that the Fifth Light Cruiser Squadron spent much of the year based not at Hong Kong, protected by shore batteries and submarines, but at undefended Weihai, some 400 miles closer to Japan.[35]

To better understand the decisions behind that vulnerable position, it is crucial to consider that the Admiralty was operating under the assumption that Japan would not declare war

[28] Ferris, 'The Last Decade of British Maritime Supremacy', p.139.
[29] Joint plans for events during a war with Japan, 25 October 1928, TNA, WO 106/91.
[30] E.g. William R. Louis, *British Strategy in the Far East 1919-1939*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), p.212; Man, 'Anglo-Japanese Alliance', 17.
[31] Barry D. Hunt, *Sailor-Scholar: Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, 1871-1946*, (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1982), p.138.
[32] Moretz, *Thinking Wisely,* p.317.
[33] Bell, 'Our Most Exposed Outpost', 61-88; Louis, *British Strategy in the Far East*, p.212.
[34] Keith Neilson, 'Japan, Maritime Power and British Imperial Defence', *British Naval Strategy East of Suez, 1900-2000: Influences and Actions*, ed. by G. Kennedy (Abingdon: Frank Cass, 2005), p.72.
[35] Route charts for the Far East, 1933, TNA, ADM 116/3472.

outright against Great Britain. As with America's 'Plan Red' envisioning a theoretical future war with the British Empire, the Royal Navy also had to plan for every eventuality.[36] Those scenarios included surprise attacks by Japan against Singapore, even if they were considered unlikely in the short-term.[37] Believing such a direct attack was improbable was not unreasonable or unrealistic at the time, given that there were few British possessions in East Asia of sufficient potential strategic value to Japan, either economic or military, that would justify risking a major war. Instead, the Admiralty believed that the most likely cause of conflict would come either from Japan first clashing with America or through a Japanese campaign of expansion in China spiralling out of control.[38] While events in 1941 saw the former scenario ultimately come to fruition, during the 1920s it was the latter that presented the greatest risk to Britain and largely dictated the Royal Navy's strategy for the China Station.

The Admiralty's war orders issued in 1920 and updated in 1924 made clear that they did not expect or desire a war with Japan, but acknowledged that a Japanese territorial drive in northern China appeared increasingly likely. Such a campaign might then trigger a wider conflict and draw in the major powers.[39] The belief that a campaign of imperial expansion was imminent stemmed back to Japan's having issued the Twenty-One Demands to China in 1915.[40] That ultimatum sought Chinese acceptance of Japan's acquisition of the former German concessions in Shandong, along with further extra-territorial rights that would effectively turn China into a Japanese protectorate.[41] Coming without advance notice, taking the Foreign Office by surprise, and with serious implications for Britain's position in China, the episode also played a part in the slow decline of the Anglo-Japanese alliance.[42] No longer distracted by its peripheral role in the First World War, Japan was free to focus on an underlying desire to acquire territory and build its own empire. It was not certain that the resulting imperial drive would aim west into China, with an alternative maritime policy

[36] Bell, 'Thinking the Unthinkable', 808.
[37] Memoranda by Admiral Charles Madden as Director of Planning, 3 February 1928, TNA, ADM 116/3126.
[38] War orders issued to Royal Navy station commanders, 12 January 1920, TNA, ADM 116/3124.
[39] War orders issued to Royal Navy station commanders, 12 January 1920, TNA, ADM 116/3124; War orders issued to Commander in Chief Atlantic Fleet and Foreign Stations, August 1924, TNA, ADM 116/3125.
[40] Osterhammel, 'China', p.645.
[41] Zhongping Chen, 'The May Fourth Movement and Provincial Warlords: A Re-examination' *Modern China*, 27/2 (2011), 138.
[42] Bell, *The Royal Navy,* p.61.

considered, which would have primarily targeted the Dutch East Indies.[43] Ultimately, however, Japanese expansionism came to focus upon the Asian mainland.

During a series of Royal Navy War College lectures between 1924 and 1925, there were a number of presentations exploring the risk of a war with Japan and the power balance in East Asia. Listing the four possible causes of such a war, for example, Lieutenant Commander Arthur Armitage placed events in China as the most likely to occur. Exploring that risk in detail, Lieutenant Commander Ivan Franks produced a full complementary lecture discussing how events in China could trigger just such as war with Japan.[44] In contrast, the three alternative scenarios that were seen as plausible were all ones in which Britain would have some influence over when and in what way it might become involved. The first of these was a Japanese invasion of the Dutch East Indies, which was seen as a potentially fast-moving event, where Britain would most likely choose militarily to support the Netherlands. As Japan would have attacked a neutral power, Britain would have had some leeway to delay a declaration of war, allowing time to ready the fleet and potentially form a multinational coalition. Likewise, the other two cases that were explored revolved around escalating diplomatic crises caused by Japanese attempts to push for immigration rights in British colonies, or through interference in India. Both those proposals appear to have involved Britain instigating the conflict, primarily as a pre-emptive move to defend control over India.[45]

It is unclear whether Whitehall felt that Japanese imperial expansion in northern China alone was sufficient to provoke a diplomatic crisis that would lead to a war directly with Britain, or whether it just opened the door to an environment where Britain might be drawn into a conflict. The latter seems more likely though, given that if Japan's territorial appetites were being satiated in the north, it might deflect them away from Britain's primary areas of interest in the Yangtze and south.[46] Japanese expansion in northern China might also distract or apply pressure on the Soviet Union, which would also be of benefit to British foreign policy. What is clear, however, is the way in which the Admiralty intended to

[43] Aizawa, 'The Path Towards', p.140.
[44] Lecture notes entitled 'China and the Policy of Japan', 1924, NMM, TRO, 401/17.
[45] Part one of a lecture on 'Naval Strategy in the event of War with Japan', 1925, NMM, TRO 401/17.
[46] Allan R. Millett, 'Assault from the sea: the development of amphibious warfare between the wars: the American, British and Japanese Experiences', in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, ed. by Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p.56; Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East*, p.87.

respond in either event, in conjunction with the wider defence apparatus of the British Empire. The Royal Navy's war orders proposed that the China Station should instigate a managed retreat of military and civilian personnel, and assets from northern China and the Yangtze. Should that process occur in the face of a direct war with Japan then the submarine flotilla was expected to play a crucial role in warding off an attack on Hong Kong and harrying Japanese advances. Emphasis was placed on the China Station's warships following unusual patterns of behaviour, to avoid the British naval force being located and destroyed. Precise interpretation of that instruction was left to individual commanders, but it is likely that the Admiralty meant warships should attempt to plot routes unexpected by their adversary if hostilities were considered probable. The key protective element to the plans, however, was that the managed retreat would occur when a situation had developed in China that could lead to a war with Japan, and therefore before Britain was a formal participant in the hostilities.[47]

With the naval antennae of the British Empire falling back on Hong Kong, the Commander-in-Chief, China was ordered to assume additional control of the East Indies Station, and the Admiralty strongly suggested he should then concentrate his two squadrons at Singapore. From that position guarding the Strait of Malacca, the combined group of six to eight cruisers was considered sufficient to hold off any provisional IJN forays into the Indian Ocean, intercept all Japanese merchant vessels, and wait while the battle fleet steamed to their relief. As the Rear Admiral formerly commanding the East Indies Station was instructed to assume control of the naval forces defending Singapore, the strengthened China force may then have been expected to return to Hong Kong, once reinforced by the battle fleet. Crucially, the 1920 set of orders and all those issued throughout the rest of the decade only loosely referred to a war involving Japan in China, one which might not initially include Britain as a combatant.[48] Those preparations for war might therefore occur while Britain was still at peace. In either event, the Admiralty did not believe that British possessions would be primary objectives in a Japanese campaign, allowing enough time for that managed retreat to occur.

[47] Standing instructions for Commanders in Chief during wartime issued by the Admiralty, 12 January 1920, TNA, ADM 116/3124; War Orders issued by Vice-Admiral Duff to the China Station, 21 February 1921, TNA, ADM 116/3133.
[48] War orders issued to Royal Navy station commanders, 1920-24, TNA, ADM 116/3124.

Central to the Admiralty's planning was an assumption that no other naval power would ally itself with Japan, allowing the Royal Navy to concentrate its force against a single, weaker opponent. In a 1923 revision to the war orders, for example, the Admiralty outlined that the three main possibilities where Japan might seek to form an alliance were Germany, Russia, and China, none of which posed a significant direct threat to the Royal Navy at that point.[49] Moreover, given that the Admiralty saw a Japanese invasion of China as the most likely trigger of British involvement in an East Asian conflict, it was probable that Britain could form a working alliance with some of the Chinese warlords.

During his time as Commander-in-Chief of the China Station, Admiral Arthur Leveson emphasised to the Admiralty how important he felt it was that Britain should seek Chinese support. Leveson argued that Japan would find it difficult to seize Hong Kong quickly should Britain have either tacit or explicit support from China, presumably referring to the Guomindang given their control of Guangdong province.[50] Nor did Leveson's opinions come as the lone voice of a diligent but distant station commander. Rear Admiral Herbert Richmond as Commander-in-Chief of the neighbouring East Indies Station, repeated the proposals in the following year.[51] Their ideas addressed one of the key concerns raised in the 1912 review of the plans to defend Hong Kong, which identified the greatest threat as one coming from a land-based attack from the direction of Guangzhou, a thrust that would render the harbour largely defenceless. The Committee for Imperial Defence had agreed with that earlier report, and predicted that 4,000 men could overcome the city from landward, but China was the only power in the position to arrange such an attack at short notice. [52] An amphibious assault against the island of Hong Kong itself would be at the mercy of Britain's submarines, shore batteries, and by the 1920s potentially any military aircraft that might have been despatched to the colony. Preventing Japan, or indeed any other major power, from moving troops through Guangdong province was therefore seen as pivotal in securing Hong Kong.

Two interesting points are raised by the tactical assumptions made by Leveson and Richmond for the potential defence of Hong Kong. Firstly, it seems strange that the Foreign

[49] War orders issued to Royal Navy station commanders, 4 January 1923, TNA, ADM 116/3124.
[50] Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 24 April 1924, TNA, ADM 116/3124.
[51] Rear-Admiral Richmond to Admiralty, 13 April 1925, TNA, ADM 116/3125.
[52] Man & Lun, *Eastern Fortress*, pp.57-69.

Office did not put greater effort into building a better relationship with the Chinese authorities in Guangzhou, considering that the Royal Navy recognised the strategic value of doing so. Secondly, the neglect of land-facing defences at Singapore in the 1930s appears even more complacent, when the not so dissimilar planning for Hong Kong in the 1920s had emphasised the vulnerability of naval harbours to an indirect attack. The latter is a little tangential to this study, and so should be left for future histories of Singapore, but the former is particularly pertinent.

It appears that discussion of potentially allying with China in the event of a war with Japan did not, at least officially, go beyond the Admiralty. The most plausible explanation is that for much of the 1920s it was China, and increasingly the Guomindang, that the Foreign Office and Admiralty saw as the greatest threat to Britain's position in Hong Kong. In June 1925, for example, the Committee of Imperial Defence considered that growing anti-imperial sentiment among Han Chinese populations presented a 'menacing' situation that threatened the security of both Hong Kong and Singapore.[53] Shared aspects of identity, culture, and language meant that there was the potential for Guomindang anti-imperial rhetoric to spread unrest to two of Britain's key imperial outposts. In contrast, while there was growing concern about Japan's long-term ambitions, senior members of the Royal Navy repeatedly emphasised that they believed Britain's relationship with Japan to be satisfactory.[54] If the British authorities saw China as the greater threat for much of the 1920s, it does raise the question about the extent to which the China Station was actually deployed to counter that threat, and not the longer-term theoretical one from Japan.

China – Friend or Foe?

Head-to-head the Chinese navy of the 1920s was no match for the Royal Navy, even if operating as a single body, which was far from likely given that the allegiance of individual warships was often unclear and did change between warlords. Chinese naval power in 1920 was based around eight out-dated cruisers, mostly built on-order for the Qing regime, some of which had already been downgraded to armoured transport vessels. The Qing had ordered a range of newer vessels prior to the revolution from western powers, but those

[53] Report signed by Committee of Imperial Defence on Situation in China, June 1925, TNA, CAB 24/176/26.
[54] Assorted correspondence about War Orders, 1920-25, TNA, ADM 116/3124.

warships were subsequently sold on to third parties after the revolution, while still under construction.[55] The largest available in 1920 therefore, the *Hai Chi,* was twenty-two years old and over a thousand tonnes lighter than the smallest British cruisers in use after the First World War.[56] To place China's naval power in perspective, the single *Kongo* class battlecruiser spotted leading a Japanese squadron off Weihai and around the Yellow Sea in 1924, could deliver a broadside greater than the entire Chinese Navy at the time.[57] A pitched battle with one of the major powers' navies would not have ended well for China. In turn, the Royal Navy had far more pressing concerns, both in East Asia and globally, than the relatively limited threat posed by a head-on confrontation with China.

While they were incapable of fighting a decisive battle against a major power, the Chinese cruisers nonetheless posed a real threat to the Royal Navy's gunboats and sloops, with whom they had frequent contact, and to Britain's interests ashore. The Chinese Southern Navy, for example, attracted much attention in 1920 while based on the Pearl River, just a few hours journey from Hong Kong. The targeted intelligence reports being gathered by the Royal Navy at that point suggest a degree of concern about the warships, particularly the political leanings of their crews after they refused to sail and join the Northern Navy.[58] That relatively small Chinese force was still sufficient to cause the Royal Navy a significant headache among the warren of waterways around Guangzhou, where the West River gunboats would be at risk of ambush. Those fears proved groundless in the end as over the following three years the Southern Navy's warships spent much of their time in port with their crews ashore.[59] After 1923 the Chinese factions made greater use of their naval resources, but by then the main warships had finally travelled up to join the North East Fleet, in and around the Yellow Sea, and so posed less of an imminent threat to British interests.

Divided up between the different Chinese factions there were also three small destroyers, ten heavy gunboats, and at least twenty-three other fighting vessels of various types, which operated under different allegiances over the years.[60] As with the cruisers, these posed no

[55] Richard N.J. Wright, *China's Steam Navy*, (London: Chatham Publishing, 2000), pp.126-127.
[56] Chesneau, *All the World's Fighting Ships*, p.412.
[57] Ship's log of HMS *Diomede,* April 1 1924, TNA, ADM 53/75887.
[58] Commodore Bowden-Smith to Admiral Duff, 1 January 1921, TNA, ADM 1/8593/133.
[59] Wright, *China's Steam Navy,* p.141.
[60] Chesneau, *All the World's Fighting Ships,* p.412.

real threat to the Royal Navy as a whole, but there were sufficient of these lesser naval vessels to overwhelm the China Station's often isolated gunboats. With an influx of modern artillery into China after the First World War, Britain's gunboats also reported a growing challenge of being fired upon from riverbanks and shorelines, with weapons increasingly capable of causing critical damage.[61] In combination, this meant that the Royal Navy's gunboat force faced the growing prospect of having its bluff called. Gunboats could be an effective tool for threatening to use force, but in isolation the same gunboats were a liability against organised opposition possessing relatively modern heavy weaponry both afloat and ashore. The Fifth Light Cruiser Squadron's presence in East Asia was therefore not solely intended to deter Japan and protect sea lanes, but also provided supporting capacity to maintain British naval dominance over China. Without that squadron, both the China Station's gunboats and Britain's imperial interests in the region would have been left extremely vulnerable to the threat of attack. Questions would arise about whether the British Empire really remained the global superpower.

The presence of large British warships presented a deterrent reminder that the Royal Navy could take significant punitive action against anyone who attacked British interests. While this did mean that the cruiser squadron was exposed to a potential surprise attack, the Admiralty did not believe Japan would consider launching one in the short-term. Nor was Britain really capable of developing an alternative strategy. In dealing with China the British government could, and in 1927 did, post additional infantry battalions as a show of strength, but without the mobility provided by the Navy those troops could only protect British interests at one or two major ports, such as Shanghai. The RAF could potentially provide a cheaper and agile deterrent, in a similar style to its previous employment in the Middle East, but again the RAF would still struggle to cover more than a few Treaty Ports.[62] A sustained RAF deployment east of Singapore also brought with it other problems. Given the limited range of interwar military aircraft, an aerial deterrent would require a number of official military airfields, which when publicly announced would have been taken by Japan and America as a breach of the Washington Treaty.[63] With Britain's grand strategy predicated on

[61] E.g. Letter from Rear Admiral Cameron to Admiral Sinclair, 17 September 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509; Chan, *Arming the Chinese,* p.54.
[62] David Killingray, ''A Swift Agent of Government': Air Power in British Colonial Africa, 1916-1939', *Journal of African History* 25, (1984), 429-444.
[63] Jordan, *Warships after Washington,* Appendix 1: Washington Treaty 1922: Chapter 1: Article XIX.

maintaining the limitations enclosed within that treaty, Whitehall was careful to avoid providing Britain's rivals with an excuse to abandon the agreement.[64] A naval solution was therefore the only one that could bridge the contrasting demands of providing effective strategies for countering the threats posed by both China and Japan.

There were few alternatives for the structure of the naval force itself. Until the planned upgrades to Singapore were completed, there were no docks east of Suez large enough for the Royal Navy's battlecruisers and only one capable of making basic repairs to some of its battleships.[65] It was not operationally feasible, therefore, for a stronger battle fleet to be sustained in East Asia, even if the Admiralty were willing or able to consider amending its grand strategy. To do so would also have involved heightened financial costs. Estimates in 1922 placed the premium of posting a battleship overseas, compared to a domestic base, at £11,000 per annum and that of a destroyer flotilla at £18,800.[66] Roughly two-thirds of the supplementary expense was attributed to greater use of fuel because warships posted overseas were expected to spend an average of ten additional days at sea. The remainder largely came from transporting and storing armament and ammunition supplies.[67] While only roughly a ten-percent increase in direct expenditure, when combined with increased wear on the vessels themselves moving a single battleship would realistically match the cost of constructing a brand-new gunboat every year.[68]

Once Singapore's facilities were fully upgraded the Admiralty did plan for the China Station to merge with the East Indies Station and become a 'Future Peace Fleet', built around a core of three battlecruisers, eleven cruisers, and two destroyer flotillas.[69] Strengthened to that degree, Britain's East Asian fleet would have been better suited to balance the opposing risks presented by China and Japan. The larger warships would be based safely beyond the range of a sudden strike from Japan at Singapore, at least in theory, while remaining close enough to quickly reach China's littoral regions. As events played out the balance of naval

[64] Neilson, 'Japan, Maritime Power and British Imperial Defence', p.72; Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.65.
[65] Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East,* p.61; Man & Lun, *Eastern Fortress*, p.35.
[66] Assorted correspondence between Admiralty planning and operations departments, 1922, TNA, ADM 116/3195.
[67] Royal Navy Statistics Department memorandum on warship expenditure, 17 February 1922, TNA, ADM 116/3195.
[68] Navy Estimates for 1925-26, 1925, TNA, ADM 116/2300.
[69] Memoranda by Director of Planning Admiral Dudley Pound, 23 October 1923, TNA, ADM 116/3195.

power swung further towards Japan before those facilities were complete. In 1923, however, the Royal Navy saw its solution as an acceptable, and crucially temporary, risk.

Surplus to requirements: the China Station ashore

Large docks for the repair of capital ships, such as those being developed at Singapore, were not the only harbour requirements that influenced the operational capabilities and strategic planning of the Royal Navy in East Asia. Equally, strategic planning over how to contain threats from Japan and China influenced the decisions made about the future of the full range of naval bases in the region, and not just the major ones. While the China Station was focused around three main harbours at Hong Kong, Singapore, and Weihai, the Royal Navy had built up a collection of facilities across a wide range of regional ports over the latter part of the nineteenth century. Shanghai, for example, hosted Royal Navy logistics facilities that were crucial for supporting the British naval deployment on the Yangtze, particularly in terms of fuel storage. Around 1890, there were further storage bases maintained by the Royal Navy at Xiamen, Fuzhou, Shantou, Zhenjiang, and Jiujiang (see Figure 3).[70] The naval base at Weihai marked the final addition, with the first debate in the House of Commons over its acquisition occurring in March 1898. Initial proposals to construct a relatively substantial fortress at the harbour were quickly shelved due to budgetary constraints after the Boer War. An amended proposal was therefore tabled, for the construction of a largely undefended forward operating base, which was adopted as official policy in February 1902.[71]

[70] Report on Coaling Stations maintained for Royal Navy vessels, c.1890, RNM, 1981/38/20.
[71] Jianguo and Junyong, *Weihaiwei Under British Rule*, pp.10-93.

Figure 3: Official Royal Navy storage facilities 1900-14[72]

The geographic spread of naval storage facilities used in the early years of the twentieth century provided the host of small warships used by the China Station with the ability to maintain operations around much of China's coastline and its major waterways. Indeed, it was this global chain of coaling stations that had allowed the Royal Navy to project power into a far wider range of areas than most other major powers, including the USA.[73] This was particularly important in China, given that gunboats were only capable of steaming for a maximum of roughly two weeks between re-coaling in harbour. Without the array of coaling posts, it would have been near impossible to patrol trade routes or apply coercive pressure effectively during times of crisis.[74] The shift to oil-fuelled boilers prior to and during the First World War meant that by the 1920s the Navy was removing many of its smaller coastal storage facilities. Coaling points continued to be maintained on the Yangtze, however, as many of the gunboats still used coal to fuel their boilers either fully or partially. The declining residual demand for coaling meant that for the most part, the storage retained was generally supervised by the local Concession councils, rather than the Navy itself. Most noticeably, the naval base at Weihai was left shrunken in stature as a single oil tanker was moored in the harbour, replacing most of the coal stores and additional shore-based staff.[75]

[72] Produced by the author.
[73] Oreste Foppiani, 'The World Cruise of the US Navy in 1907-1909', *Il Politico* 71/1 (2006), 121.
[74] Salkeld, 'Witness to the Revolution', 119.
[75] E.M.C. Barraclough, *I was sailing: An Old Sailor Remembers,* (unpublished), Brotherton Library, p.60.

While the general debate over moving to using fuel oil in warships during the early twentieth century was a complicated one, there were a couple of key points in the context of the China Station. Fuel oil has up to twice the energy density of coal, which either enabled additional space to be made available within vessels or alternatively it could extend their range, or in many cases a combination of the two.[76] The higher energy density also meant that the bulk transportation of fuel between storage points was a far more efficient process.[77] Despite testing different locally-mined sources of Chinese coal, British officers had struggled to find a reliable supply of the higher quality steam coal required for ship's boilers. Welsh steam coal not only has an energy content over one-third higher than many regional sources, but it also produces far lower levels of ash, which reduced the requirement for boiler maintenance. Even blending different grades and using local coal for stoves only produced marginal savings, although the China Station did make greater use of medium-quality coal from Australia in this way.[78] The Navy therefore relied upon colliers continually shipping bulk quantities all the way from Wales and Australia to a range of coaling points all around China.[79]

In contrast, with a higher energy density and with sources far close to the Far East than Wales, less merchant shipping capacity would be required to deliver the same fuel energy. With the same British dominance of the global oil tanker fleet as there was with colliers at the start of the interwar period, the resources were already in place for the switch.[80] As a result, in 1922 the Admiralty's Navy Stores department proposed deploying oil-fuelled warships overseas and coal-fuelled ones at home ports where possible given the potential cost savings.[81] The simpler process of piping fuel oil between ships also meant that fleet tankers could re-fuel warships on patrol in calmer conditions, something that was near-impossible with bulk quantities of coal. A single fuel pump also removed the slow task of having seamen man-handling tonnes of coal into ship's bunkers, which was particularly

[76] Eric J. Dahl, 'Naval Innovation: From Coal to Oil', *Joint Force Quarterly* 2 (2000), 51.
[77] Jon T. Sumida, 'British Naval Operational Logistics, 1914-1918', *Journal of Military History* 57/3 (1993), 461.
[78] Papers of Sub-Lieutenant Douglas Claris, 1911-12, Imperial War Museum (IWM), Documents 10854; Steven Gray, *Steam Power and Sea Power: Coal, the Royal Navy and the British Empire, c.1870-1914*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp.88, 263.
[79] Salkeld, 'Witness to the Revolution', 119; Lambert, 'Strategic Command and Control', 381.
[80] Martin Daunton, 'The Sea and the Economic Slump, 1919-1939', in *The Sea In History: The Modern World*, ed. by N.A.M. Rodger (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), p.599.
[81] Memo on fleet disposition from Navy Stores department to Admiralty, 3 March 1922, TNA, ADM 116/3195.

burdensome for smaller warships and their crews. Indeed, as the chorus to a Royal Navy seaman's song from before the period put it so eloquently: 'Coaling, coaling, coaling – Always bloody well coaling'.[82] Local labourers were sometimes used for the process, but this had become increasingly infrequent in the years before the First World War as cost-saving measures resulted in crews being seen as a 'free' alternative.[83] As a result of these factors the switch away from coal could and did have a transformative effect on the way smaller warships operated, particularly for those used on the Chinese coast.

By 1924, the China Station had six Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) oil tankers ranging in size from transporting 680 to 4,000 tonnes of fuel, including the Navy's first 'oiler' RFA *Kharki*.[84] Rather than having a gunboat depart from the section of river or coastline it was patrolling to take on coal at a port, one of the tankers would be despatched to tour and refuel a number of warships in situ. Not only did this mean that ship-for-ship the China Station of the 1920s could be more productive, it also reduced the requirement for access to shore-facilities. Provisions such as fresh food were less of a concern as they could normally be purchased at settlements along the coast and waterways, even during times of crisis, and so had a limited impact on the Navy's storage requirements outside of major naval bases.[85] Ammunition had always been stored at a few guarded naval bases and was generally transported and passed on by other warships on the China Station. This resulted both from security concerns about ammunition presenting a tempting target for bandits and soldiers, and from the possibility of legal problems that might arise from merchant shipping carrying military cargoes.[86]

Even in the context of Britain's relationship with China, the gradual disappearance of shore-storage leased by the Royal Navy from the Treaty Ports did not attract any real attention. Over the long-term, however, the shift did have significant implications that would influence the development of the Navy's strategic planning. In particular, the value of Britain maintaining custody over Weihai declined as a result of the change in fuel. For a coal-fuelled Royal Navy to be capable of projecting power into the Yellow Sea, around northern China,

[82] Cyril Tawney, *Grey Funnel Lines: Traditional Song & Verse of the Royal Navy 1900-1970,* (London: Routledge, 1987), p.20.
[83] Gray, *Steam Power and Sea Power,* pp.135-159.
[84] Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 14 March 1924, TNA, ADM 116/2262.
[85] E.g. Intelligence report from HMS *Widgeon*, 15 October 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[86] J.H.K. Clegg, 'The Yangtze and the Situation in China', *The Naval Review* 15/1 (1927), p.207.

and towards Japan, maintaining a naval base at Weihai was beyond question. By 1920, most battleships had sufficient endurance to reach those regions from Hong Kong, particularly if they re-coaled at Shanghai. The cruisers and smaller vessels required as part of a balanced battle-fleet and to operate in the region on a day-to-day basis, however, would in some cases struggle to reach those distant expanses of water, let alone patrol them.

The shift to fuel oil meant that by the early 1920s the number of China Station vessels that required coaling at Weihai had dropped to the flagship HMS *Hawkins,* the four *Flower* class sloops and potentially any gunboats sent north to the Hai River during times of crisis. Coal storage at Weihai did still retain some wider strategic significance, as a few of the capital ships that might be despatched to East Asia during a crisis were still partially coal-fuelled.[87] That residual value was set to disappear in the mid-1920s, with the planned retirement of the *King George V* class and the impending withdrawal of the *Iron Duke* class into reserve, the Royal Navy's last remaining coal powered battleships.[88] Closer to home, *Hawkins* and two of the *Flower* class sloops were also due for rotation back to home waters, to be replaced by newer oil-fuelled equivalents.

In a curious twist, the withdrawal of the *Iron Duke* class battleships from the Mediterranean was in itself determined by events in East Asia. Prior to the completed upgrade of Singapore's oil storage facilities, the Admiralty was forced to retain coal-fuelled warships as part of any battle fleet responding to a war with Japan, to ensure sufficient fuel supplies were readily available.[89] Once those works were complete, only a sustained major conflict with Japan might force the Admiralty to deploy more coal-fuelled warships to the Far East. As a result, by the late 1920s just two of the China Station's sloops were expected to require coal at Weihai, and even then it would only be in minimal quantities.

The crisis that developed as a result of the Northern Expedition in 1926-27 did delay the Navy's planned switch to a largely oil-fuelled China Station, but by mid-1928 those rotations had been completed.[90] A brief exception to the expected requirements was during February

[87] Summary of Admiralty Strategic View of the Fleet after Washington Treaty, 24 February 1922, TNA, ADM 116/3195.
[88] Jordan, *Warships after Washington,* p.63.
[89] Memorandum on the distribution of the fleet by Director of Planning Dudley Pound, 22 March 1922, TNA, ADM 116/3195.
[90] China Fleet Daily Summary, 15 July 1928, TNA, ADM 116/2624.

1929 when HMS *Magnolia* was temporarily held at Weihai, due to unrest at Yantai. With outside temperatures averaging -1°C, the stationary ship consumed roughly 50 tons of coal per week keeping men and machinery warm.[91] While that elevated usage did foster the briefest possible stay at the base before returning to warmer climates, the total consumption was still relatively modest compared with the quantities previously required to re-coal major warships like HMS *Hawkins*.

Without its prior role as a coaling point, Weihai's value to both the Royal Navy and the British Empire as a whole was no longer clear. During a 1924 strategic review, for example, it was noted that while a northern Chinese base might help in a war against Japan, possession of Hong Kong was the only location truly critical for enabling offensive operations.[92] As an operational base, Weihai's main occupation by the 1920s came from hosting the annual fleet manoeuvres during the summer months when many of the China Station's ocean-going warships would congregate in the harbour. As similar training activity was regularly conducted at Mirs Bay, near Hong Kong, there were alternative locations available.[93]

The main reason Weihai remained the preferred option was because it enjoyed comfortably warm weather in the summer months, compared to hot and humid Hong Kong. As a result, the harbour was popular with the China Station's officers and crew as a relaxing alternative to Shanghai.[94] The area around the base had also become something of a holiday destination for the British colonial population in China, in addition to hosting boarding schools for their children.[95] Indeed, as superfluous naval buildings, including those previously used in conjunction with coaling warships, were demolished during the 1920s they were quickly replaced with private shops and residences.[96] As Leading Seaman 'Bobby' Roberts later recalled 'I always found it a pleasure to spend a few days there. It had a lovely swimming beach, several shops and its own church.'[97] Marine William Greenland likewise

[91] Report from HMS *Magnolia* to Admiral Stirling, 1 March 1929, TNA, ADM 116/2694; Foreign Office Handbook about Weihaiwei, July 1919, TNA, FO 373/4/6.
[92] Appendix F to Admiralty War Orders, August 1924, TNA, ADM 116/3125.
[93] E.g. Ship's log of HMS *Hermes* 1926, TNA, ADM 53/78830.
[94] Interview with H.L.S. Fancourt, 1991, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 12274, Reel 3, 16 minutes; Interview with H.C. Claxton, 1990, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 11945, Reel 8, 9 minutes; Interview with A. Gaskin, 1986, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 9344, Reel 6, 9 minutes.
[95] Barraclough, *I was sailing*, pp.4-60; Jianguo and Junyong, *Weihaiwei Under British Rule*, pp.100-200.
[96] Maps of Weihai, 1930, TNA, FO 93/23/36.
[97] Unpublished memoirs of William 'Bobby' Roberts, Undated, IWM, Documents 7214a.

noted that the base contained a number of 'beautiful flower gardens' and nicely decorated buildings.[98] With a nine-hole golf course and bathing huts by Liugong Island's beaches, Weihai was starting to resemble a holiday camp by 1930, rather than a naval base.[99]

The declining strategic case for maintaining a British enclave in Northern China almost certainly played a role in the British establishment's growing willingness to return Weihai to Chinese control after the First World War. As early as 1919, for example, proposals were tabled and broadly supported by British officials for China to resume complete control of all mainland areas including the town of Weihai itself, but with the lease covering Liugong Island and therefore the naval base extended.[100] Protracted negotiations culminated without an agreement between Britain and China, however, with the fate of Liugong Island a red-line issue for both parties. The British government had also been pressing for China to refund various expenses incurred in 'developing Weihaiwei', although it was unsure how the Beiyang government might pay, even if they agreed to the demand.[101] In contrast, complaints from the British business community in Weihai were largely dismissed or ignored by the Foreign Office. Consul A.P. Blunt, for example, acknowledged residents' concerns in 1923, but only provided vague assurances that compensation might be paid if serious personal financial losses could be shown to have been incurred as a direct result of the British government's action.[102]

While there were diplomatic imperatives behind Britain's return to the negotiating table in July 1928, the lack of Royal Navy opposition helped smooth the way to an agreement. In the final treaty, for example, the Navy conceded that in the event of either Britain or China becoming involved in a war, all Royal Navy and Fleet Auxiliary vessels would vacate Weihai in accordance with international accords. Effectively this downgraded the Navy's rights from the extra-territoriality of an imperial outpost to that of a tenant, although one that retained the right to freely conduct live-firing training exercises both afloat and on-shore.[103] That move was extremely symbolic against the backdrop of the wider struggle over British extra-

[98] Diary of Marine W.J. Greenland, 1 June 1926, Royal Marines Museum (RMM), 1978/48b; Photograph collection of Marine W.S. Phillips, 1923-25, RMM, 1998/24/C.
[99] Diary of Paymaster Commander H. Miller, IWM, PP/MCR/16.
[100] Jianguo and Junyong, *Weihaiwei Under British Rule*, pp.286-290.
[101] Sir Guy Francis Acheson to Sir Malcolm Ramsey 13 February 1923, SOAS Special Collections, MS211354.
[102] Correspondence between A.P. Blunt and E.E. Clark, 1923, SOAS Special Collections, CHAS/MCP/30.
[103] Agreement for the Rendition of Weihaiwei, 13 February 1930, TNA, FO 93/23/36.

territorial rights in the country. Moreover, the Navy's acquiescence was an acknowledgement that the naval base no longer played a part in the Royal Navy's plans for a potential conflict with Japan.

Without a role as a strategic fuelling point, leaving warships at Weihai amid wider hostilities in the region would have been a significant liability. After all, at that point the Admiralty believed war between China and Japan might produce scenarios where Britain was inexorably drawn into the hostilities. If the naval base had little value in such a war, then its immediate evacuation to try to avoid being drawn into the conflict was no real concession. This further supports the existing arguments by historians such as Jürgen Osterhammel that those locations where Britain initially surrendered its extra-territorial rights in the late 1920s were relatively insignificant to the Empire.[104] Contrary to Edmund Fung's argument, however, Weihai did still possess strategic value in the years between 1905 (when the enclave should have been returned to China when Russia lost Port Arthur) and the early 1920s when coaling facilities were no longer a critical requirement for the Royal Navy.[105] The timing of the return was therefore not solely down to a change in imperial policy after the December Memorandum in 1927, but also due to the change in practical naval circumstances.

The Hong Kong Question

In contrast to Weihai, the maintenance of Hong Kong's military facilities continued to serve a vital strategic purpose in Britain's plans for a potential war with Japan. While the debate raged about prioritising units for the defence of Singapore, the importance of holding Hong Kong remained largely unchallenged within the Navy, as the only location from which offensive operations could be launched. The then Commander-in-Chief, East Indies Station, Rear-Admiral Richmond, summarised the position in a letter to the Admiralty in April 1925. Richmond stated that Japan's capture of Hong Kong would effectively secure their dominance of East Asia, and it would prove 'exhausting in the highest degree' for Britain to re-capture the harbour.[106] Indeed, Richmond went further to argue that if the USA remained neutral then Britain's only hope for a favourable outcome involved preventing Japan from

[104] Osterhammel, 'Imperialism in Transition', 262.
[105] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.17.
[106] Rear-Admiral Richmond to Admiralty, 13 April 1925, TNA, ADM 116/3125.

securing a shift in the balance of power in East Asia through the seizure of either Hong Kong or Singapore.[107] Singapore was vital to the defence of the Empire. [108] Hong Kong was the key that could unlock a potential victory. Richmond may have been a particularly vocal critic of naval policy in the period, but Christopher Bell has outlined how in the case of the Admiralty's war planning for Japan, his arguments were favourably received in Whitehall and influenced the official strategy.[109]

The strategic value to Hong Kong's location did not necessarily come from enabling a submarine and cruiser blockade of the Japanese mainland, as has been proposed by Andrew Field, although that core element of the war plan would have been near impossible without the territory.[110] The Admiralty's economic assessment of Japanese import requirements centred on three core assumptions. Firstly, the British Empire controlled a number of key strategic raw materials that Japan required, particularly rubber, which could be limited and then cut off if relations broke down between the two powers. Secondly, in the event of hostilities Britain was unlikely to risk upsetting America by being heavy handed with neutral shipping crossing the Pacific, but a partial eastern blockade might limit Japan's ability to source materials via the Americas. Lastly and crucially, the Yangtze basin provided significant quantities of raw materials vital for the Japanese economy. This included alternative sources for some of those resources that were otherwise imported from the British Empire.[111] If Britain's attrition strategy was to succeed, slowly pushing Japan towards either a rash and decisive naval engagement or the negotiating table, then the Yangtze would be pivotal.

The Yangtze River basin in the 1920s, as it still does today, provided vast quantities of rice, iron ore, and other raw materials for the domestic Chinese and international markets. At the river's mouth, Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces also contained roughly half China's manufacturing capacity, with GDP per capita levels at the time behind only Japan and

[107] 'Part three' of Rear-Admiral Richmond's memorandum to the Admiralty, 13 April 1925, NMM, RIC 5/1.
[108] John Fisher, 'British Forward Defence in Asia during World War I', *Journal of Asian History* 37/1 (2003), 91-98.
[109] Bell, 'How are we going to make war?', 127-141.
[110] Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East,* pp.56-58.
[111] Appendix X to War Memoranda Far East, August 1924, TNA, ADM 116/3125.

Taiwan in Asia, and were growing at roughly twelve percent per annum.[112] Much of that trade flowed through Shanghai, which processed roughly half of all China's foreign trade in the 1920s and was home to a similar proportion of China's modern factories.[113] Royal Navy estimates from 1930 suggest that the Central China region provided almost two thirds of Japan's oilseed imports and roughly one-quarter of Japan's iron ore and manganese supply (required for steel and aluminium alloys).[114] The interlinked loss of trade routes with southern China, by blockade from Hong Kong, would further compound those losses, particularly for manganese shipments that were crucial for strategic heavy industrial production, such as warships, tanks, and aircraft. While the Korean peninsula and Manchuria provided alternative sources of some resources, the abundance of capacity and ease of transportation along the Yangtze made the region an obvious target for a wartime economic blockade. Britain's strategic theory was that victory should be possible through blockading 'the raw materials obtained from China, (upon which) Japan depends for her ability to carry on the war.'[115]

The value of an economic blockade was disputed within the Navy of the time. Rear Admiral Richmond while commanding the East Indies Station, for example, argued that Japan could easily replicate sufficient trade routes to overcome a general British blockade. Richmond contended that the weak-link Pacific routes would prove impossible to cut unless America sided with Britain. There is certainly logic behind that assessment. The only resource whose loss could cripple Japan quickly in a war was oil, which the USA could and did provide.[116] A distant blockade might slowly damage Japanese efforts to build large new warships, but it would do a better job of making America rich, rather than winning the war for Britain. As Admiral of the Fleet David Beatty mused in 1925, the American approach in the First World War of sitting on the side-lines while 'plucking the Chestnuts from the fire' had proven fruitful for them.[117] It was therefore one that in all likelihood would be repeated if the opportunity arose. Richmond nonetheless made the case that the Royal Navy should adopt

[112] Debin Ma, 'Economic Growth in the Lower Yangzi Region of China in 1911-1937: A Quantitative and Historical Analysis', *Journal of Economic History,* 68/2 (2008), 355-392.
[113] Parks M. Coble, *The Shanghai Capitalists and the Nationalist Government 1927-1937,* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1984), p.17; Keller, Li, and Shiue, 'Shanghai's Trade, China's Growth', p.345.
[114] Appendix notebook to a lecture on the economic position of Japan, May 1930, NMM, PET/7.
[115] Joint service plans for events during a war with Japan, 25 October 1928, TNA, WO 106/91.
[116] Appendix notebook to a lecture on the economic position of Japan, May 1930, NMM, PET 7.
[117] Memorandum sent by Admiral Beatty to Maurice Hankey, July 1925, NMM, BTY 8/8.

the very same blockade approach, but with a reversed focus. His argument was based upon the assumption that any aggressive Japanese actions to increase influence in China, which might lead to a war with Britain, would also result in a military clash with Chinese forces. The primary location where that might occur was the Yangtze basin. In such a war, Richmond proposed aggressive naval attacks against Japanese supply lines, allowing the gradual destruction of the Japanese army ashore. That strategy would also comply with international law on submarine warfare, a prerequisite to American goodwill, when compared with the vague allusions to submarine attacks on merchant shipping around Japan itself.[118]

Hong Kong is over 1,400 miles closer to the Yangtze River's mouth than Singapore, a distance that would have made a British blockade of either type considerably more effective. The Royal Navy's submarines would be able to spend longer on patrol, with supply and maintenance easier with the reduced distance. In addition, aggressive battlecruiser or cruiser raids, similar to those undertaken by the *Kaiserliche Marine* against Britain in the First World War, would be able to strike supply routes or exposed naval patrols before falling back to the relative safety of Hong Kong's guns.[119] The 1924 Royal Naval War College syllabus on Japan argued that a potential military blockade should focus on the trade routes with China, while all diplomatic efforts should focus on encouraging America to enforce a voluntary embargo.[120] That strategy was only likely to succeed if the Royal Navy still had its key forward operating base on the Chinese coast.

As a gateway to China, Hong Kong was also expected to play another crucial role. Admiral Richmond argued in 1925 that with British support, potentially including a quickly deployed expeditionary force, China could be encouraged to push Japan economically and militarily out of its footholds on the mainland.[121] While Richmond's generalised statements suggest he did not fully appreciate the fractious state of Britain's relationship with the main Chinese factions in 1925, he was one of those who helped set the groundwork for later proposals.

[118] Memorandum by Rear-Admiral Richmond to the Admiralty, 14 June 1924, NMM, RIC 5/1.
[119] For First World War see: Massie, *Castles of Steel*.
[120] C.E. Fayle, Summary of conclusions made in the Royal Naval War College syllabus on Japan, 1924, NMM, TRO 401/17.
[121] Rear-Admiral Richmond to Admiralty, 13 April 1925, TNA, ADM 116/3125.

Richmond had taken Leveson's ideas and applied them in a broader sense to Britain's grand strategy for East Asia, which then tentatively fed into official policy going into the 1930s.

Christopher Bell's discussion of Britain's grand strategy highlighted the second part of that process, but it did not acknowledge the crucial role played by Admiral Leveson and the importance of the Yangtze basin. It is highly likely that Richmond's ideas were actually just a restated, if refined, version of those submitted the previous year. As neighbouring station commanders, the two Admirals would have corresponded on such issues, but they also had a long history of sharing ideas. Having first worked together in 1909, they had not always seen eye-to-eye, most notably during the months Richmond served as Leveson's deputy, when he was Director of the Operations Division in late 1914.[122] Richmond's brusque and arrogant manner clashed with the 'considerate' Leveson, who was a strict adherent to naval hierarchy and protocol. By the end of the First World War, however, an unlikely bond had developed, with the two regularly socialising and debating naval issues. Richmond's comments about his friend, who he liked 'immensely', are particularly prescient; 'He never writes down his opinions and in consequence never develops them.'[123] When Leveson's rudimentary suggestion was recorded as 'controversial' and then politely shelved by Director of Plans, Captain Dudley Pound, he would not appeal out of a belief in due process. Unafraid of confrontation and rocking the boat, Richmond took up the fight, re-drafted the proposals, and his determined lobbying the following year was more successful, for which he has been awarded the credit.[124] Feeding into the debate over the legend or myth of Richmond's stature as one of the great naval thinkers of his time, in this one example he was certainly a talented analyst, but one who matured the fruits of Leveson's imagination.

Discussion about China's military capabilities throughout Britain's war planning for East Asia is rather sporadic and says much about the attitudes of many individuals within the British establishment at the time. Flippant dismissals of Chinese military capabilities did occur on purely racial grounds. As the Director of Naval Intelligence Gerald Dickens later proposed in 1935, the Royal Navy had been guilty of regarding Asian nations as 'picturesque rather than

[122] Nicholas Black, *The British Naval Staff in the First World War,* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2009), pp.248-250.
[123] Arthur Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral,* (London: Cape, 1952), pp. 92-108, 252, 290-293.
[124] Letters and memoranda by Captain Dudley Pound regarding proposals by Admiral Leveson, June-July 1924, TNA, ADM 116/3124.

important', with officers disbelieving that a 'coloured' nation could ever match a Western one.[125] Those unprofessional assessments notwithstanding, the wider geo-strategic situation was a factor behind the intermittency of serious, objective top-level debate about the potential threat posed by China. China in the early twentieth century was certainly not a first-class world power, but it was nonetheless a large country that could wield significant military clout, or at least it could in theory. The bulk of China's strength was on land, however, particularly when compared with those major powers with which the country interacted. While the Royal Navy focused on Japan, the British Army also had bigger concerns elsewhere, particularly the northern border of India and the threat posed by Soviet Russia through Afghanistan.[126] When combined with the lack of a clear central authority in China after 1911 and the minimal amount of territory formally or informally held by Britain in the country, it was unlikely that China would or could directly threaten more than the furthest outposts of the Empire.

The Cooperation Challenge

While China and Japan did pose geo-strategic challenges for the British Empire after the First World War, particularly in balancing opposing requirements, the relationships were not always combative. Throughout the 1920s, both Asian nations also cooperated with the British authorities in the region, providing significant tangible assistance during particular events. Along with other powers with influence in East Asia, including America, France, and Italy, the varying degrees of assistance expected from temporary and ad hoc international arrangements influenced both the structure and operational behaviour of the China Station. Over the course of the decade it was increasingly the ability to establish a multilateral approach to threats that had a defining influence on the outcome of many potentially pivotal moments in Britain's evolving relationship with China.

Working with China to help support British interests was a difficult proposition in the 1920s, particularly as some of the most pressing concerns saw the two countries on opposite sides of the table. Trying to build common ground over extra-territoriality rights even with

[125] Lecture by Director of Naval Intelligence Captain G.C. Dickens at Greenwich War College entitled 'Japan and Sea Power', 15 May 1935, King's College London's Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (KCLMA), Catalogue ID 1114.
[126] Clayton, 'Deceptive Might', p.284.

individual local warlords, for example, was unlikely to yield any worthwhile results. Indeed, the lack of a central figure with meaningful power over the country as a whole negated the possibility of solid agreements upon which Britain could build elements of an effective collaborative defensive strategy. Even working with individual factions was problematic. The strongest faction with which Britain regularly interacted, the Guomindang, spent the first half of the decade vociferously and ideologically opposed to Britain having formal or informal imperial influence over parts of China. Moreover Britain was possibly the most unpopular foreign power in the eyes of the Chinese population, particularly in the two years after the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925, during which British-led policemen shot dead roughly a dozen protestors in Shanghai.[127] In spite of all the diplomatic difficulties, however, Royal Navy officers did still find grounds to build working relationships with local Chinese officials.

Joint anti-piracy work was one such area where it was relatively easy to come to an understanding. While some of what Britain classed as piracy was in fact boycott picketing, which was often either tacitly or explicitly supported by the main factions, a good portion involved small bands who attacked all merchant shipping, regardless of the flag flown. Operations where Royal Navy warships transported Chinese troops to investigate and clear reported pirate 'nests' occurred throughout the decade. The scale, scope, and frequency of such raids, however, was not sufficient to materially impact upon the Royal Navy's gunboat force in the region. With the exception of short periods when one or two gunboats were held unused in reserve, the Royal Navy was unable to reduce the number of gunboats or significantly lower the intensity at which they operated. The efforts made may have had some localised effect on shipping safety, but their real wider value was diplomatic rather than strategic.

The deeper strategic collaboration proposed by Admirals Leveson and Richmond in 1924-25 appears to have struggled to gain any tangible support during discussions within the Admiralty or Whitehall.[128] This is probably a reflection of the diplomatic realities of Britain's relationship with China in the mid-1920s, which would have made it all but impossible to

[127] Bickers, *Empire Made Me,* pp.164-167; Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* pp.40-41; Osterhammel, 'China', pp.649-650.
[128] Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 24 April 1924, TNA, ADM 116/3124; Rear-Admiral Richmond to Admiralty, 13 April 1925, TNA, ADM 116/3125.

secure an agreement. Indeed, the Admiralty appears to have believed that there was a strong possibility that the reverse of the two Admirals' plan might take place, with Japan securing Chinese support for a war against Britain. Suspicions about Japan's efforts to seduce China with promises of returning Hong Kong certainly lingered on into the early 1930s.[129] It was only after 1927, when the fractious relationship between Britain and the Guomindang started to soften, that an agreement of any real significance could potentially have been brokered. With the communists purged from the Guomindang, Britain having made concessions to appease Chinese anti-imperial fervour, and softer rhetoric used by both sides, meaningful negotiations were a possibility. The rise of General Tanaka Giichi's government in Japan that same year, advocating an aggressive foreign policy towards China, also meant that there was growing reason for the Guomindang to be interested in securing Britain's good favour.[130]

From being on the verge of war in 1927, Britain moved quickly to re-establish some modest means of collaborating with China, harking back to the approach used in the last years of the Qing dynasty. Between 1904 and the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, when the program was effectively suspended, Britain trained forty-six Chinese naval officers at the War Colleges in England.[131] That process was resumed in late 1929, when twenty cadets made the journey to spend part of the following year on a gunnery training course aboard HMS *Erebus,* based out of Devonport.[132] The sudden shift is all the more remarkable given that cadets from the Guomindang's Whampoa Academy were suspected of organising many of the picket boats that had severely hampered British trade in Guangzhou in 1925.[133]

In the early 1920s, Whampoa cadets either received training in Japan or based around Japanese principles, including a nationalistic interpretation of the Bushidō mentality.[134] Offering British military education therefore provided an opportunity to swing Chinese officers' attitudes back towards European ideas, as well as build a sense of camaraderie.

[129] Correspondence between Admiralty and Vice-Admiral Waistell, January 1931, TNA, ADM 116/3118.
[130] Thomas R.H. Havens, 'Japan's Enigmatic Election of 1928', *Modern Asian Studies* 11/4 (1977), 545-551; Nish, 'An Overview', 612-615.
[131] Appendix II to Captain Baillie-Grohman's report on the Naval Mission to Nanjing, 31 August 1932, TNA, ADM 1/8756/133.
[132] Western Morning News, 11 December 1929, p.4.
[133] Vice-Admiral Everett to Admiralty, 21 August 1925, TNA, FO 371/10947.
[134] Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare,* p.167.

Indeed, shortly after the resumption of training Chinese officers in Britain, the Royal Navy also sent Captain Harold Baillie-Grohman to take a post as Head of Training with the Nanjing Government's Navy. That naval mission was sent in response to a request by Admiral Chen Shaokuan, the Minster of the Navy, for Britain to assist with the development of a new Chinese navy.[135] Tellingly, the briefing given to Baillie-Grohman by Admiral Howard Kelly at Hong Kong emphasised that his primary goal was to build friendly relationships with the Chinese officers, rather than to focus too heavily on actually training them.[136] It was also around that point, at the end of the decade that the Royal Navy started actively working with the Guomindang against communist groups as well as pirate bands. HMS *Aphis* was involved in a series of events on the Middle Yangtze between Dongting Lake and Jiujiang, for example, from towing struggling transport vessels to bombarding communist troops in support of Guomindang ground forces.[137] So long as the Guomindang was perceived to represent a clear and present threat to Britain's interests then no accommodation could be reached. Once those short-term issues were resolved, however, then China became a potential part in the grand strategy to secure Britain's interests in East Asia, against the spread of communism as well as Japan.

During the years preceding 1927, in which Britain became the focus of anti-imperial sentiment in China, it was Japan that provided the assistance necessary to mitigate some of the new or growing risks. In contrast to cooperation with China, which was reluctantly desired but impractical, collaboration with Japan was often seen as disagreeable but the pragmatic choice. On a day-to-day basis, it was not unusual for the two nations' navies to work together for anti-piracy work or in co-ordinating additional mutual security measures for international concessions at Treaty Ports. In November 1923, for example, HMS *Cicala* was despatched quickly to assist a Japanese merchant steamer near Guangzhou that had grounded while trying to escape a pirate attack.[138] Similarly, a Japanese naval squadron proceeded to Xiamen in March 1924 during a period of anti-foreign unrest at the city. Admiral Leveson reported that he was grateful for the calming influence the force had upon

[135] Bruce A. Elleman, 'China turns to the sea, 1912-1990', in *The Sea In History: The Modern World*, ed. by N.A.M. Rodger (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), p.320.
[136] Report by Captain Baillie-Grohman on the Naval Mission to Nanjing, 31 August 1932, TNA, ADM 1/8756/133.
[137] Private papers of J.W. Edwards, 1929-1931, IWM, Documents 11614, Box 01/39/1.
[138] Diary of Commander Charles Drage, 14 November 1923, IWM, PP/MCR/99, reel 2.

the area, while the Royal Navy was focused upon events around Guangzhou and Hong Kong.[139]

Even in those early years, with the Anglo-Japanese alliance a recent memory, there were signs that the two navies did not necessarily see eye-to-eye. While visiting Yantai in September 1924 the captain of HMS *Bluebell* was forced, reluctantly, to place his ship in front of Japanese guns to act as an intermediary during a dispute. A Chinese merchant steamer had accidentally, it would seem, hit the bow of a Japanese submarine, causing minor damage.[140] Such incidents involving submarines were not uncommon in Chinese waters, including the sinking of HMS *Poseidon* in 1931 with the loss of twenty-one lives.[141] Lieutenant Charles Drage of *Bluebell* describes how both the submarine and a nearby Japanese destroyer quickly aimed their main guns at the steamer and threatened to sink it, even though the vessel's deck was crowded with civilians. Drage noted that the passengers included a number of white women, which may have precipitated the stern demand by *Bluebell's* Commander Algernon Smithwick that the Japanese not use force. The steamer's Norwegian captain reportedly later complained that the Japanese had also attempted to arrest him, until a British motor launch inspected the damaged submarine and proposed a compensation fee.[142] While British service personnel were themselves not immune from heavy-handedness, the extreme reaction and particularly the threat to foreign civilians appears to have fuelled suspicions about the reliability of Japanese servicemen among *Bluebell's* crew. Such sentiment was absent in Drage's entries prior to the incident, but became a common feature in the following months.

Similarly, in a slightly more light-hearted case from July the following year, *Bluebell* was at Fuzhou with the USS *Sacramento* trying to establish whether reports of rioting in the city were true. When the IJN *Komahashi* arrived, both *Bluebell* and *Sacramento* attempted to contact the new arrival, but to no avail. Drage recalled with amusement that both the British and American warships went so far as to light up the *Komahashi* with their ships' searchlights, which still had no effect. While the incident was apparently taken in good

[139] Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 29 April 1924, TNA, ADM 116/2262.
[140] Diary of Commander Drage, 7 September 1924.
[141] *China Mail*, 10 June 1931, p.1.
[142] Diary of Commander Drage, 22 September 1924.

humour and there may have been reasons why *Komahashi* failed to respond to being hailed, the British officers regarded the move as having been a deliberate snub.[143]

A normal encounter between British and Japanese servicemen in those earlier years, however, was perhaps one similar to a dinner hosted by Governor Reginald Stubbs at Hong Kong, honouring the visit of Vice-Admiral Seizō Kobayashi (Saito) in November 1923. The same Charles Drage noted that while pleasant, the evening was not particularly enjoyable and did not lead to any lasting friendships. There was no outright hostility, but nor was there much success in building a sense of camaraderie.[144] Such feeling was not exclusive to the officer class, with Chief Petty Officer Douglas Poole leaving an uncharacteristically unemotional description in his journal, after attending the same official events.[145]

Nonetheless, with significant military resources at their disposal and a growing willingness to employ them, Japan became a significant participant in talks about multi-national deployments to meet some of the challenges encountered in 1920s China. As a result, it was not just relatively small, reactive scenarios where cooperation was considered. During a Committee for Imperial Defence meeting in June 1925, for example, the service heads agreed that Britain was reliant upon multi-national forces, particularly involving Japan, to defend its interests adequately in Northern China.[146] While it would take Britain five weeks to move an infantry brigade from India to Tanggu (Taku), even if one was available for re-deployment, Japan had the men ready and could transport them in a fraction of that time. Similarly, that same month Foreign Minister Baron Kijūrō Shidehara informed his ambassador in London that the IJN was to push for greater naval cooperation with the Royal Navy, particularly on the River Yangtze, because of the wider benefits for Japan.[147] Thanks to the Government Code and Cypher School intercepting and decrypting Japanese diplomatic messages, Whitehall was aware of that desire to work together in China, although it is unclear whether the intelligence was passed onto the China Station.

The rising crisis in late 1926 going into 1927 presented a situation where deep strategic cooperation could prove particularly beneficial to both Britain and Japan, as the

[143] Diary of Commander Drage, 1 July 1925.
[144] Diary of Commander Drage, 24 November 1923.
[145] Journal of Chief Petty Officer Douglas Poole, 23 November 1923, Museum of the Royal Navy, 1994/253/1.
[146] Minutes of Committee for Imperial Defence meeting, June 1925, TNA, CAB 24/174/26.
[147] Foreign Minister Shidehara to Japan's embassy in London, 25 June 1925, TNA, HW 12/71.

Guomindang's Northern Expedition seized control of city after city along the Yangtze. Even during the early stages, however, there were the first signs that what had been discussed in theory all the way to the highest levels was not so appealing to those decision makers in practicality.

Throughout the second half of 1926, the Admiralty was supported by the British government in repeatedly strengthening the naval forces available to the Commander-in-Chief of the China Station, irrespective of what other powers were doing. With the Shanghai Defence Force to follow from December 1926, Britain was committing significant quantities of men and materiel in an effort to shore-up its imperial prestige. Moreover, diplomatic realities meant that the kind of multinational response previously envisaged would prove extremely difficult to bring to fruition. America and Japan as the other major imperial powers operating in China were both reluctant to stand too closely alongside Britain, which had become the main focus of the Guomindang's anti-imperial rhetoric and actions.[148] The surprise with which the other powers greeted Austen Chamberlain's new policy for China, announced with the December Memorandum, highlights the fact that during this phase Britain recognised its isolation and was following a unilateral approach.

As the Northern Expedition neared the larger cities of the Lower Yangtze, in which Britain along with the other major powers had more invested, military rather than diplomatic concerns took priority. Proposals to form a multinational force therefore resurfaced, particularly those involving Japan. By April 1927 these ideas were being debated widely around the China Station, as recorded by Midshipman Leonard Sheppard in his official journal, while aboard HMS *Despatch*. The main plan under consideration involved 10,000 British and Japanese troops forcibly occupying key sites along the Yangtze between Hankou and Shanghai. Sheppard summarised the 'severe facts against this plan' that he had perceived from discussions among his fellow officers. Firstly, a sustained deployment of thousands of British troops, in areas where there was no existing military infrastructure for stationing land forces, would come at an enormous financial cost. The potential benefits were not expected to justify that hefty bill. Secondly, such a provocative act was expected to undermine all the good work, as they saw it, that the Navy had done up to that point in

[148] Osterhammel, 'China', p.651.

remaining neutral during China's internal conflicts. Lastly, it was felt that pre-emptively occupying Chinese territory would play into the hands of Bolshevik propaganda, weakening rather than strengthening Britain's position. Sheppard concluded that a firm but defensive military approach would be more advisable, with a focus on propaganda and diplomatic efforts to push China towards 'sensible' governance.[149]

Curiously Sheppard made no mention of an issue highlighted by Foreign Office staff during this period, that of Japan's response to the Nanjing Incident. While IJN warships were present during the events, they had operated separately from the Anglo-American naval force, and did not open fire upon the city. Given the location of the Japanese civilians in the city, the separate evacuation was fully understood by the Royal Navy. However, to avoid being caught by the Chinese backlash after the incident, Japan's diplomats worked hard to draw a distinction between the different foreign powers. This included sending a letter to the Chinese press blaming Britain and America for what had occurred.[150] While not necessarily inaccurate in its content, the spirit of that move was not in keeping with Britain's expectations that the major powers would act in concert. It may be that junior officers in the Navy were not particularly aware of all the diplomatic complexities of the situation and the disputes involved. Alternatively, the letter may have been accepted by the Royal Navy as an illustration of how the IJN was increasingly operating by itself and was no longer seen as a team player among the major powers.[151]

Irrespective of diplomatic disputes with Japan, the British establishment continued to consider further proposals for a joint force to secure their mutual interests. Perhaps highlighting the influence of the Tanaka government's more aggressive foreign policy, the scale of the schemes suggested by the Japanese increased quite rapidly. In October 1927, for example, a plan was proposed for an Anglo-Japanese military occupation of all the major railways and ports in the lower Yangtze region. The argument made by Japan's envoys was that by controlling the main transport hubs, it would be possible to force a peaceful settlement upon the two main Chinese factions. The proposal was supported by the

[149] Journal of Midshipman L.C.S. Sheppard, 30 April 1927, RNM, 1991/101/67.
[150] Memorandum on relations between Britain's legation to China and Japan's envoys, 1927, TNA, FO228/3507.
[151] Rear-Admiral Cameron to Vice-Admiral Tyrwhitt, 1 May 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510; Journal of Commander Hamilton, 12 May 1927, NMM, HTN 214.

experience of the two Imperial Japanese Army regiments, totalling 8,000 men, which had been taking up positions along the Qingdao-Jinan railway since May, in the First Shandong Expedition.[152] While that deployment ended in controversy and violence the following year, as the Northern Expedition continued its advance, the move appeared superficially to be a successful pseudo-peacekeeping effort in late 1927.[153]

Some individuals within the Foreign Office were cautiously welcoming of the proposals, but they were summarily rejected by the British armed forces. The War Office appears to have voiced the strongest opinions, arguing that it would be unwise to have independent battalions spread across the region, as they might find themselves isolated and cut-off from support. Moreover, the British military attaché to the Foreign Office argued that in order to control all the main transport points across the lower Yangtze, which would be necessary for the plan to prove effective, it would require between three and six additional infantry divisions.[154] Given that the Shanghai Defence Force only equated to roughly one division, the plan would require Britain to at least quadruple its core land forces in China. Even using skeleton divisional structures that would likely equate to a minimum of roughly 40,000 men. Finding sufficient manpower to achieve that during peacetime was nigh-on impossible, from both a political and practical standpoint.

The Royal Navy was also hesitant about committing to such a plan. Policing the Yangtze and protecting the various treaty ports was already stretching the China Station's resources, even with the reinforcements it had received. Indeed, the Admiralty had pushed the Prime Minister into ordering the return of 208 men from the 12th Royal Marine Battalion in July 1927, roughly one-fifth of the unit's manpower. A shortage of marines back in Britain was making it 'very difficult to provide officers and men for necessary duties'.[155] Ordering a British expeditionary force into Chinese sovereign territory to seize strategic locations, was a sufficiently aggressive move that it would likely provoke a Chinese military response. Should that happen, forts along the Yangtze were expected to start firing on British naval and civilian vessels. The Royal Navy would therefore have had to demolish a significant number

[152] Lampson's assessment of military proposals made by Japan, 31 October 1927, TNA, FO228/3507.
[153] Nish, 'An Overview', 613.
[154] Assorted correspondence related to Japan's military proposals, October 1927, TNA, FO228/3507.
[155] Assorted correspondence between Adjutant-General Hutchison RM, Lieutenant-Colonel Carpenter RM, Vice-Admiral Tyrwhitt, Major-General Duncan, the Admiralty, and Prime Minister Baldwin, June and July 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8711/144.

of fortifications, as a pre-emptive measure, which in itself would prove a challenging task. Such a sweep would probably also have proven ineffective, given the ease with which artillery batteries could be quickly entrenched at locations overlooking the river. As a result, Sir Miles Lampson reported to Whitehall that while he found aspects of the Japanese proposal attractive, it was militarily impractical. The British government would neither deploy sufficient resources to enact the plan nor authorise the use of sufficient 'coercive force' for it to prove effective. [156]

Discussion of such grand plans in the late 1920s does not disguise that in practice there was a growing belief within the British military and diplomatic corps that relations with Japan had reached a tipping point, between cooperation and confrontation. Colonel F.S.G. Piggott, commanding the nascent military intelligence establishment in East Asia, reported on this issue in February 1928. He stated that while Britain was sharing roughly eighty percent of the intelligence it obtained on the situation in China with their Japanese colleagues, the amount being shared in return was decreasing and perhaps only amounted to half. Piggott suggested that where Japan had a direct interest in securing British assistance, particularly involving naval issues, they were willing to share information and cooperate. When that was not the case, the opposite was felt to be true.[157] It is difficult to assess how accurate Piggott's statement was, but it nonetheless illustrates the breakdown in trust between the two powers in the late 1920s.

This situation was not helped by some individual Royal Navy officers' attitudes towards their Japanese counterparts and the difficulty of accommodating their very different naval culture. Upon arriving at Jiujiang in May 1927, for example, Commander Louis Hamilton of HMS *Wild Swan* messaged his international counterparts, introducing himself and taking command of defending the city's international concession, as the senior naval officer present. He recorded angrily in his diary that the Japanese commander apparently ignored the message, forcing Hamilton to despatch one of his officers to investigate and 'request' a meeting. When the two men met the following day, Hamilton accepted that language was a challenge. However, his account also indicates that there was a mutual dislike on racial

[156] Assorted documents outlining British military response to Japanese proposals for the occupation of the Lower Yangtze, TNA, FO228/3507.
[157] Colonel F.S.G. Piggott to MI2, 21 February 1928, TNA, WO106/5258.

grounds, which reinforced an apparent underlying dislike that Hamilton held for Japan.[158] This is a particularly curious scenario, as Hamilton was a long-term loyal follower of the then Commander-in-Chief, Vice-Admiral Reginald Tyrwhitt, who was moderately pro-Japan by interwar Royal Navy standards and whose interactions contrasted with those of his understudy.[159]

What stands out about the relationship between Britain and Japan in China, particularly in the impact it had upon military cooperation, is the relatively steady trend observable over the decade. While individual Royal Navy officers had different opinions and racial attitudes towards their Japanese counterparts, and willingness to work with them, at any one point in time the extent of assistance offered or requested by IJN commanders was broadly similar. This suggests the IJN tended to dictate what degree of collaboration generally occurred, a consequence of the comparatively rigid IJN command structure and the resulting uniformity of behaviour, in line with their orders from Tokyo.[160] In contrast, the Royal Navy's interactions with the warships of other major powers during times of crisis could prove unpredictable.

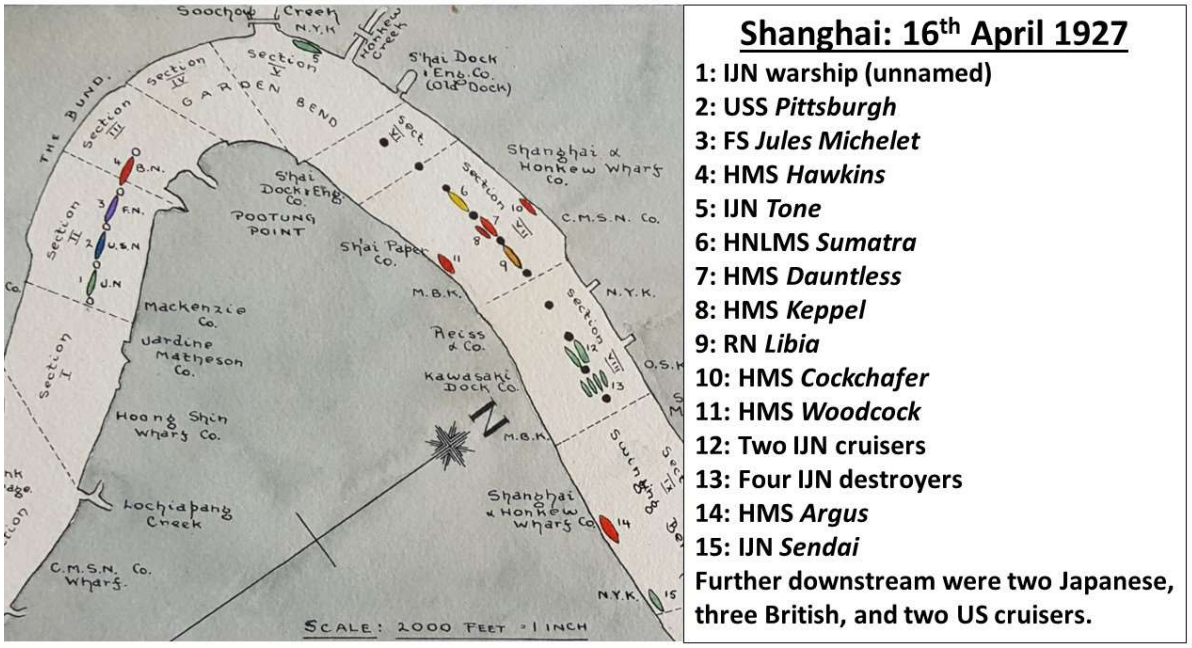
Europe's Retreat

During the 1920s France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal all sent small flotillas of warships to China's waterways and coastline. While the Royal Navy regularly socialised with the crews of those warships, particularly the Dutch, only the first two nations really had sufficient naval strength in the region to have any potential, tangible impact upon Britain's strategy for East Asia.[161] When in 1927 a multi-national force was amassed to defend Shanghai, for example, the second-tier participants only accounted for roughly one percent of all foreign military personnel ashore.[162] Afloat the situation was much the same, with France, Italy and the Netherlands all making token displays of force, with lone warships

[158] Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-28.
[159] Personnel file for Louis Keppel Hamilton, 1 February 1919, TNA, ADM 196/145/22; Alfred T. Patterson, *Tyrwhitt of the Harwich Force*, (London: Macdonald, 1973), p.249.
[160] Lecture on 'Japan and Sea Power' by the Director of Naval Intelligence, 15 May 1935, KCLMA, Catalogue ID 1114, Chapter two.
[161] Hansard, 13 April 1927, vol.205, cc.342-3; de Winton, *Ships in Bottles,* p.30; Barraclough, *I was sailing,* p.60; Journal of Commander Hamilton; Interview with H.C. Claxton, 1990, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 11945, Reel 8, 14-20 Minutes.
[162] William R. Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue: U.S. Naval Officers in China, 1922-1933,* (Florida Scholarship Online, 2011), pp.123-127.

anchored on the Huangpu River at Shanghai (see Figure 4). The majority of international warships not from Britain or Japan that were sent to the city appear to have been moored out of sight downriver.[163] As a result, the second-tier navies focused on planning a safe evacuation of their own civilians from the city, while passively acquiescing in the defence plans formulated by the major participants. Similarly, in June 1929 during the ceremonial second funeral of Doctor Sun Yat-sen, at the newly constructed mausoleum for him at Nanjing, only Britain, France, Italy, Japan, and the US had warships available to attend as symbolic gestures of respect.[164] While they infrequently provided some assistance with particular naval tasks, the Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese warships in East Asia had little impact on events in and around 1920s China.

Figure 4: International warships anchored at Shanghai in April 1927[165]



Neither France nor Italy deployed genuinely significant numbers of warships or troops to China during the 1920s, but they are worthy of some discussion in the impact they did have upon the course of events. Diplomatic ties between Britain, France, and Italy may have been strained at times during the 1920s, but on a day-to-day basis far from home their navies tended to socialise regularly, with the arrival of an Italian warship in particular often

[163] Hansard, 23 March 1927, vol.204, c.401.
[164] Vice-Admiral Tyrwhitt to Admiralty, 14 June 1929, TNA, ADM 116/2694.
[165] Map of Huangpu River, produced 23 April 1927, NMRN, 1991/101/67.

heralding much merrymaking.[166] Those bonds were reflected in their operational behaviour, with the three navies generally happy to co-operate. In dealing with the piracy threat around Daya Bay, for example, the French Navy agreed to adjust the routes taken by their warships as part of the Royal Navy's visible-deterrent strategy. In addition, the French would join their British counterparts in conducting gunnery drills in the bay, in an effort to further enhance the impact of their passage upon the local pirate bands.[167] While appreciated by the British, such collaboration had negligible practical impact upon their plans for East Asia. A few additional vessels assisting intermittently was welcome, but only supplemented existing approaches. Moreover, it appears that none of those few French warships actively assisted their British counterparts during the period, including during moments when they were present on the fringes of key clashes. The *Doudart de la Grée,* for example, was recorded as having been at Wanxian throughout the disastrous events in 1926, passively observing the entire incident.[168] Even a British request for the French gunboat to move its moorings in order to ensure the French vessel's own safety, was reportedly rejected. Likewise, at Hankou in May the following year, the local French commander chose not to co-ordinate his defensive plans with the joint Anglo-American preparations, although the two groups did discuss their respective approaches.[169]

The 1927 crisis provided a rare exceptional case, when additional French military resources were sent to China. As the Northern Expedition neared Shanghai, both France and Italy adopted a policy that was broadly similar to Britain's in wanting to protect the extra-territorial status enjoyed by the International Settlement and French Concession in the city. When summarising the positions taken by 'Friendly Powers', Major-General John Duncan took comfort from having those two nations, along with Spain, as willing participants in his planned defensive line.[170] Their stances meant that Britain had symbolic allies and would not stand alone if the worst were to happen. A section of the defensive line around Shanghai's International Settlement was nominally controlled by the Italian shore parties, for example, although in practice the district was actually guarded by Indian soldiers from

[166] Martin Kitchen, *Europe Between The Wars: A Political History*, (London: Longman, 1988), pp.53-64.
[167] Documents supporting Cabinet discussion about piracy in China, June 1926, TNA, CAB 24/181/72.
[168] Rear-Admiral Cameron to Admiral Sinclair, 17 September 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[169] Rear-Admiral Cameron to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 1 May 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[170] Major-General Duncan to Earl Richard Onslow the Under-Secretary of State for War, 10 March 1927, TNA, WO 191/1.

the British Army's Twentieth Infantry Brigade.[171] On paper 3,000 additional troops and eight cruisers from France did also provide something tangible, more than just words of support.[172] In practice, however, those forces were focused solely on the French Concession and operated in a state of friendly isolation from the main Shanghai Defence Force, mirroring what was happening at Hankou.[173] Even during times of crisis therefore, Britain's European allies provided little in the way of real support that could assist with even temporary strategic deployments of its armed forces.

The first signs of definitive collaboration only occurred with the French Navy after the 1927 crisis and Japan's new, increasingly aggressive foreign policy.[174] The appointment of Admiral Stotz to France's East Asia fleet in late 1927 led to proposals being made at a local level that would genuinely assist with Britain's strategy for the region. Stotz and the senior officers sent with him all spoke English to a standard considerably above what was normal in the French Navy, and they had been reportedly chosen for the role based upon their comparatively anglophile views.[175] The stronger bond between Stotz's and Tyrwhitt's, then later Vice-Admiral Arthur Waistell's, senior officers appears to have stimulated greater discussion of how France might be able to assist Britain, perhaps unofficially. While none of the proposals gained sufficient support for a formalised agreement, informal understandings do appear to have been reached.

In the event that Britain lost Hong Kong during the opening stages of a war with Japan, for example, there was a degree of willingness among France's East Asian authorities to overlook the Royal Navy using Cam Ranh Bay, on the coast of modern-day Vietnam. Roughly half-way between Singapore and Hong Kong, Cam Ranh could offer the Royal Navy warships an intermediate location to re-fuel and re-organise, ready for a fight off the Chinese coast. There was some disagreement over the bay's precise value among the British military officials who reported on the location, mainly over the lack of local supply sources, but overall there was general agreement that access to the bay would be strategically

[171] Report by the General Staff of the Shanghai Defence Force, 1 April 1927, TNA, WO 191/2.
[172] Hansard, 13 April 1927, vol.205, cc.342-3;
[173] Major-General Duncan to Earl Richard Onslow the Under-Secretary of State for War, 15 April 1927, TNA, WO 191/2.
[174] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.158.
[175] Report by Consul-General F.G. Gorton at Saigon, 30 January 1928, TNA, ADM 116/2624.

beneficial.[176] Ultimately, however, the lack of a signed treaty meant that the Royal Navy chose not to base their strategy on unreliable, regional good intentions. As a result, Admiral Kelly recommended in 1932 that official permission should be sought from the French government to use the bay as a staging point, although in such a format that France would be able to remain neutral.[177]

The emergent special relationship

If the informal, localised agreements made between the China Station and its European allies were felt to be too tentative to rely upon, and Japan was increasingly seen as a potential foe, there was still one further actor in the region from whom Britain might draw support. As with the China Station and Japan's First Expeditionary Fleet, the USN Asiatic Fleet was tasked with projecting power across the Yellow, East China, and South China seas, and along China's main rivers, but it also covered the Western Pacific. In particular, the Asiatic Fleet was required to protect America's pseudo-imperial position in the Philippines. With a considerable expanse of water to operate across, eighteen modern destroyers were based out of Cavite Navy Yard near Manila, in addition to a dozen submarines, and an old cruiser.[178] A sub-command existed for inland work in China, titled the Yangtze Patrol, which started the decade with eight ancient mostly ex-Spanish gunboats that dated from before the Boxer Rebellion.[179] Further strengthened by the presence of a battalion from the US Marine Corps, the Asiatic Fleet had sufficient resources potentially to influence Britain's strategic plans for the region.

Based upon their respective governments' policies throughout the decade, the USN's Asiatic Fleet and the China Station should have found it difficult to collaborate effectively. The US was the only major power 'genuinely admired by the urban elites of Republican China', with a strong cultural presence in the country.[180] In conjunction with the relative comfort derived from that admiration, the US government tended to limit the interventions made by its armed forces. While Washington insisted on its businesses retaining access to the Chinese market, along similar lines to Britain, influential State Department officials such as John

[176] Military intelligence reports on Cam Ranh Bay, June-July 1925, TNA, WO 106/5452.
[177] Vice-Admiral W. Kelly to Admiralty, 19 January 1932, TNA, ADM 116/3118.
[178] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* p.3.
[179] Konstam, *Yangtze River Gunboats,* Appendix.
[180] Osterhammel, 'China', pp.644-645.

MacMurray urged restraint to avoid drawing the ire of China's warring factions. Those officials' arguments were aided by the reports submitted by America's Minister to China, Jacob Schurman. Schurman felt the main protagonists in China cared more about being respected as a modern power than they genuinely believed the communist rhetoric they sometimes espoused.[181] To some extent that hypothesis was proven correct in the case of the Guomindang, when the 1927 schism revealed the divisions between nationalists and those genuine communists. The heavy emphasis on restraint, to avoid stoking anti-American feelings among the Chinese population, was passed down along the chain of command, and sometimes featured heavily in local officials' deliberations.[182]

The contrasting approaches taken at the top level by Britain and America were at their most pronounced during times of crisis, particularly in the aftermath of the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925 and later when the Northern Expedition neared Shanghai in 1927. In both cases, Washington authorised landing sailors and marines as part of international efforts to protect their civilians and property in Shanghai, as well as other ports. There was considerable unease about the USN becoming caught up defending other nations' interests, particularly when it was not as a result of a conscious decision by American officials. In June 1925, for example, Rear-Admiral Charles B. McVay Jnr. USN protested angrily to Rear-Admiral David Anderson RN that some British civilian officials were deliberately trying to exploit America's relative neutrality. While he maintained a friendly relationship with Anderson, McVay subsequently reduced the size of the USN landing party in Shanghai.[183] Similarly, in 1927 the US government pursued a comparatively cautious policy towards the defence of its interests in Shanghai, instructing its military forces there to maintain civil order but not to engage in hostilities against Chinese troops.[184]

America's policy for China may have been heavily influenced by top-down decision making during the 1920s, but implementation is always reliant upon personnel on the scene. While the interwar US Navy was generally an extremely formal organisation, with strict adherence to hierarchy and obeying orders, the Asiatic Fleet was not. In the Royal Navy, the China

[181] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* pp.8-16.
[182] Diaries of Commander Drage, January 1924, IWM, PP/MCR/99.
[183] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* pp.40-44.
[184] General Duncan to Earl Richard Onslow the Under-Secretary of State for War, 10 March 1927, TNA, WO 191/1; Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* pp.146-151.

Station was the second most senior overseas command after the Mediterranean and so high-ranking roles aboard the major vessels were relatively prestigious, if not always popular. In contrast, the Asiatic Fleet was low down the list of US Fleets and was not seen as somewhere an officer could make a career. Indeed, for some ordinary crewmen the Asiatic Fleet presented the opportunity to 'hide' from various troubles that might catch up with them elsewhere.[185] By its very nature therefore, the Asiatic Fleet was somewhat maverick.

On a day to day basis, the Asiatic Fleet's destroyer and gunboat crews operated on the Chinese coast thousands of miles from home and frequently hundreds of miles or more from their nearest fellow USN warship. They would often be in close proximity, however, to Royal Navy warships that were equally isolated, that carried crews who spoke the same language and who had been comrades in arms just a few years beforehand. As a result the two navies' crews regularly socialised together and to a greater degree than either did with other foreign powers in China, with the possible exception of the Dutch.[186] Even in the major ports such as Shanghai where there were opportunities for other entertainment, the British organised Anglo-American boxing tournaments and USN warships invited their Royal Navy counterparts to watch the latest Hollywood films in make-shift mess-deck cinemas.[187] In October 1925 when HMS *Magnolia* was at Shantou, for example, the British crew spent most evenings attending informal cinema screenings held aboard the different US Navy vessels in the harbour.[188]

When at liberty ashore, Anglo-American rivalry did sometimes reveal itself, and not just among the enlisted men. In one case two officers became embroiled in an unofficial boxing match in the street, after an exchange of bravado in a bar, much to the entertainment of the enlisted sailors present. The British officer was apparently very popular with his crew, after having won the impromptu bout.[189] Arguments over girls were a relatively common cause of disagreements, along with British sailors resenting the fact that their American

[185] Thomas C. Hone and Trent Hone, *Battle Line: The United States Navy 1919-1939*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006), pp.158-162.
[186] de Winton, *Ships in Bottles*, p.30; Barraclough, *I was sailing*, p.60; Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-28, NMM, HTN 214; Interview with H.C. Claxton, 1990, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 11945, Reel 8, 14-20 Minutes.
[187] Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book, 1927; de Winton, *Ships in Bottles*, p.30; Gloucester Citizen, Monday 16 January 1928.
[188] Ship's log of HMS *Magnolia* December 1924 – November 1925, TNA, ADM 53/80209.
[189] Unpublished memoirs of Captain Ramsbotham, p.88.

counterparts were better paid and flaunted it when ashore.[190] It was common, for example, for US sailors to privately hire Chinese labourers to perform their more burdensome tasks when in port.[191] While British sailors did also sometimes out-source tasks, their disposable incomes were stretched thin in comparison, in part due to higher mess bills when serving in East Asia.[192] Senior officers were generally relaxed about this fighting between their crews, particularly when compared with more serious developments with other nations. At least two clashes between American personnel and those from Japan in 1919 and then France in 1925, for example, led to significant diplomatic incidents.[193] In the former case, a disagreement between a few sailors in a Tianjin brothel escalated into a mass-fight between roughly thirty-five US marines and one hundred Japanese servicemen. All sporting and social events between American and Japanese personnel in the city were subsequently banned to prevent further clashes. Commonality of culture and language meant that it was easy for Anglo-American servicemen to insult each-other and start fights, but also for cooler heads to calm those involved and prevent things from spiralling out of control.

Official, formal social events were different scenarios, and officers from both navies treated them extremely seriously. In one case, an American captain was forced to berate his sailors after they deliberately ate all the food at a dinner they were hosting for a Royal Navy warship, including the meals intended for their guests. A second event was held shortly afterwards, during which everyone involved was ordered to be on their best behaviour.[194] While a little day-to-day friendly rivalry was tolerated, or even seen as beneficial, it could not be allowed to cause a loss of face when senior officers were present. There was undoubtedly a rivalry between the two navies, but strong bonds of friendship were formed.[195]

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[190] Interview with I.L. Wight, 1982, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 6196, Reel 2, 9-11 minutes.
[191] Hone and Hone, *Battle Line: The United States Navy*, p.163.
[192] Elinor Romans, 'The Internal Economy of the Royal Navy in the Twentieth Century', *Mariners Mirror* 94/1 (2008), 80.
[193] Warren J. Tenney, 'A Disturbance Not of Great Importance': The Tientsin Incident and U.S. - Japan Relations in China, 1919-1920, *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 3/4 (1994), 325-344; Unpublished memoirs of Captain Ramsbotham, p.86.
[194] Interview with L.E. Brown, 1993, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 13581, Reel 2, 7 minutes.
[195] Unpublished memoirs of Captain Ramsbotham, p.88; Interview with I.L. Wight, 1982, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 6196, Reel 2, 9-11 minutes.

In practice, therefore, Asiatic Fleet crews tended to collaborate enthusiastically with their British counterparts, an attitude that extended up the full length of the two respective regional commands. Admiral Joseph Strauss USN reported in 1921, for example, an agreement with his British and Japanese counterparts to divide patrolling sections of the Yangtze between the three forces, with the Royal Navy even sometimes referred to as 'our strength on the River'.[196] By 1924, Rear-Admiral Anderson gave a speech to the Shanghai Branch of the China Association, during which he commented on the heavy collaboration with the USN and that Rear-Admiral McVay was 'always most willing to co-operate'.[197] In return, McVay stated around the same time that the two navies operated alongside each other almost as if they were the same force.[198] Often this came in the form of relatively simple acts. In the aftermath of the Wanxian Incident in 1926, for example, USS *Stewart* steamed up river and then transported wounded British servicemen quickly downriver for treatment, as the American vessel was considerably faster than the gunboats and steamships that were otherwise available.[199] Likewise, the commanders of HMS *Wivern* and USS *Paul Jones* were both praised for conducting a rapid and largely peaceful joint evacuation of seventy-five British and American civilians at Zhenjiang on 26 March 1927, rather than attempting two separate efforts.[200]

What that bond meant was that while officially American warships were only meant to protect their own civilians and interests, in practice they also extended their guardianship to British subjects and property, almost without question. In September 1926, for example, Commander Shaffer USN announced that his gunboat would protect the British community at Chongqing during unrest at the city, as the Royal Navy was busy responding to and dealing with the aftermath of the Wanxian Incident.[201] Moreover, the Royal Navy knew that Shaffer had been authorised to extend that protection by Admiral Clarence Williams, commanding the USN Asiatic Fleet.[202] As a result, such incidents meant that the Commander

[196] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* p.66.
[197] Speech made by Rear-Admiral Anderson, 11 August 1924, SOAS Special Collections, CHAS/MCP/30.
[198] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* p.43.
[199] 'Report from an eyewitness' in *The Wanhsien Epic*, (Hankow, 1926), NMRN, 1979/216, p.21.
[200] K.R. Buckley, 'The Third Destroyer Flotilla in China 1926-1928', *The Naval Review* 18/1 (1930), p.107.
[201] Rear-Admiral Cameron to Vice-Admiral Alexander-Sinclair, 17 September 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[202] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* p.103.

in Chief of the China Station could feel confident that British interests would be protected at more Treaty Ports than the Royal Navy could guarantee on its own.

Whereas Japanese warship captains rigidly adhered to the policies and approaches dictated by the IJN's high command, the Asiatic Fleet's officers operated in a relatively flexible system that enabled them to bend rules. With generally strong bonds of friendship, commonality of culture, and to some extent similar views about mutual Anglo-American priorities in East Asia, USN officers were also more motivated to work with the Royal Navy. The events involving Shanghai in 1927 are highly illustrative of how an unofficial, regional approach was adopted by the Asiatic Fleet, which influenced how Britain responded to the crisis.

The seven USN warships and 1,200 marines stationed at Shanghai in early 1927 were officially under orders from Washington to protect only American lives and property.[203] In the event of the Guomindang attempting to seize the International Settlement violently, those forces were expected to conduct a managed evacuation of the city. Indeed, the choice by President Calvin Coolidge only to deploy ships and marines was part of a wider public display that America was looking to avoid enflaming the situation and being drawn into a conflict.[204] Whether deliberately or unintentionally, those orders were sufficiently vague to provide the American commanders on the scene with considerable room to act on their own discretion.

William Braisted and Nicholas Clifford have already identified that Brigadier-General Smedley Butler of the US Marine Corps sought to exploit loopholes in the orders issued by Washington to take a stronger stance in the defensive plans for Shanghai.[205] When the first Guomindang troops approached the city in late March, for example, Admiral Williams USN and Butler argued about the marines exceeding their instructions by taking up positions in the defensive perimeter and not limiting their activities to internal policing.[206] While the marines maintained a public stance of neutrality, they were collaborating fairly heavily with the British behind the scenes. Indeed, on at least one occasion American marines were

[203] Hansard, 23 March 1927, vol.204, c.401.
[204] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* pp.117-129.
[205] Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire,* p.230.
[206] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* p.126.

ordered back to quieter locations by Williams after that collaboration became too obvious. Butler went far beyond just words, however, in the extent to which he exceeded Washington's orders.

In the days after the Nanjing Incident, the General Staff of Britain's Shanghai Defence Force sought greater assurances about what assistance America might render. Under a heading of 'Very Secret' an unnamed British colonel confirmed that the US 'Commander' had agreed to commit his forces as part of a contingency plan for the International Settlement. As Admiral Williams was repeatedly arguing with Admiral Tyrwhitt at this point, it seems highly probable that the mystery commander was Butler.[207] In the event of a concerted attack by Guomindang forces, the US Marines would prepare themselves along the border between the Settlement and the French Concession. This would be done under the guise of their existing patrols within the interior of the settlement.[208] Should the French lines look at risk of collapse, the marines would then march into the concession, evacuate all British and American civilians, and take up a defensive line along Avenue Joffre – now known as Huaihai Middle Road.[209] As a wide boulevard offering a broad field of fire, it was hoped that Avenue Joffre would be sufficiently defendable to secure the Southern flank of the International Settlement. US servicemen would then have been fully committed to the fight for Shanghai, well beyond America's official line of protecting its civilians in the city.

The secrecy and deliberate anonymity of the document highlights the sensitivity surrounding the unofficial collaboration undertaken by the US Navy and Marine Corps. Major-General Duncan described the planned involvement of US marines in defending the French Concession, for example, as 'a purely unofficial understanding between General Butler and myself and a ruse on his part to over-ride his instructions.'[210] The American consul in Shanghai had also apparently thrown his weight behind the secret agreement, adding to the impression of wider support among the local US representatives.[211] Those re-assurances and actions, taken at a local level, were sufficient for the British high command

[207] Patterson, *Tyrwhitt of the Harwich Force*, p.249; Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue*, pp.126-139.
[208] Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire,* p.229.
[209] Memorandum by a Colonel of the Shanghai Defence Force General Staff, 28 March 1927, TNA, WO 191/1. The author was probably Colonel Brownrigg, the staff officer commanding the force defending Shanghai.
[210] Major-General Duncan to Earl Richard Onslow the Under-Secretary of State for War, 15 April 1927, TNA, WO 191/2.
[211] Memorandum by a Colonel of the Shanghai Defence Force General Staff, 28 March 1927, TNA, WO 191/1.

to feel confident enough to plan for American marines to secure the southern boundary. As a result, within a week of that agreement with Butler the 12th Royal Marine Battalion was moved from acting as a reserve force within the International Settlement to guarding British businesses in Pudong, on the other side of the Huangpu River.[212]

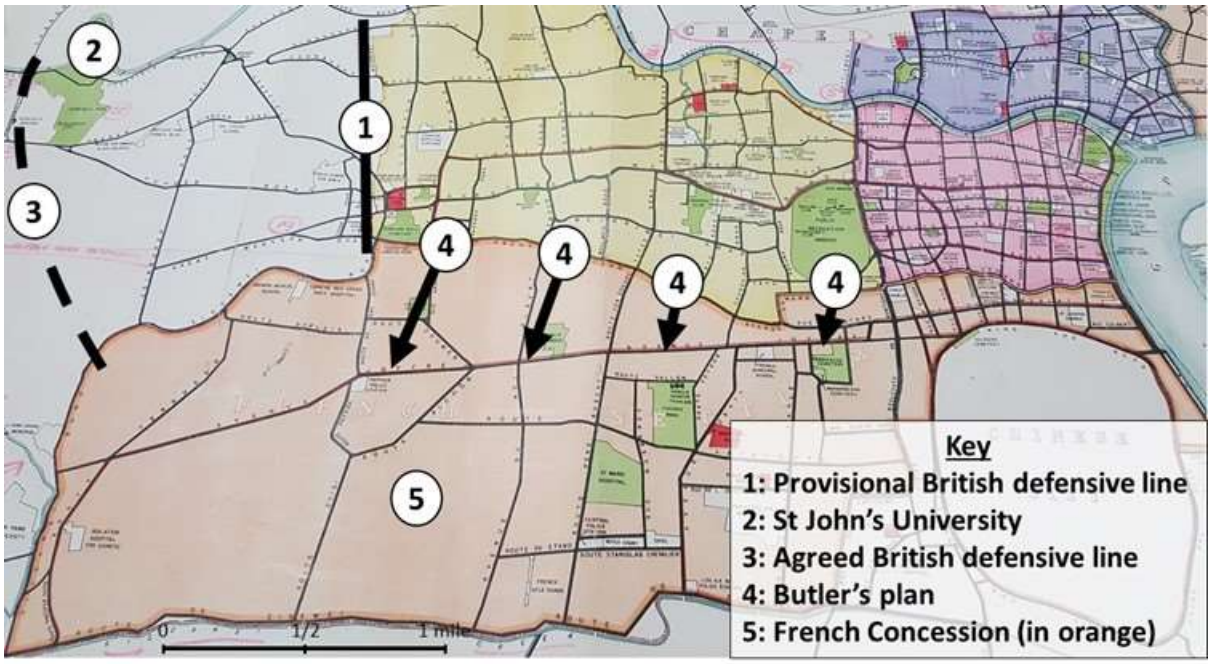
While Brigadier-General Butler showed a particularly strong desire to work closely with his British counterparts in Shanghai, there are also plenty of suggestions that even the allegedly Anglophobe Admiral Williams was guilty of privately exceeding his orders, or at least bending them. According to Major-General Duncan, Williams told him that in the event of Guomindang troops attacking Shanghai, he would 'take any action that I (i.e. Williams) considered necessary for the safety of Americans under the conditions then existing'.[213] That statement was interpreted by the British commander to mean that American forces would stay and fight, but could not be seen to place themselves in the front-line.

A single comment from Williams could of course have been misconstrued by the British. There is evidence to suggest a deal was struck, however, committing both nations' armed forces to defend each other's interests at Shanghai. Williams had been faced with the challenge of defending St John's University campus, an American run institution, situated over a mile beyond the boundaries of the International Settlement. William's orders included protecting the campus, but doing so would have left American marines isolated and in the path of the advancing Chinese forces, in breach of those same instructions. A subsequent agreement to extend the British-led defensive line to include the university was inherently linked to US marines assisting British forces if they came under attack and were at risk of being over-run (see Figure 5). It was only on this basis that Duncan agreed to uphold the agreement after his arrival in Shanghai, despite the fact that it exceeded his instructions from Whitehall.[214] Again, by itself the incident could simply have been a misunderstanding, but it adds to a pattern of incidents where Admiral Williams risked Washington's ire by going beyond the letter of his orders. At the very least it shows that the protection afforded to the American staff at the university by British forces was not wholly

[212] Entries in the 12th RMB War Diary, April 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8709/102.
[213] Major-General Duncan to Earl Richard Onslow the Under-Secretary of State for War, 10 March 1927, TNA, WO 191/1.
[214] Major-General Duncan to Earl Richard Onslow the Under-Secretary of State for War, 15 April 1927, TNA, WO 191/2; Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire,* pp.229-230.

magnanimous.[215] Co-operation and deal-brokering between Anglo-American forces in Shanghai was far more widespread and detailed than has previously been acknowledged, with numerous officers from both nations' conducting their own diplomacy.

Figure 5: Foreign defensive lines for the Shanghai International Settlement 1927[216]



While Britain and America's overall strategies for China may have differed in tone, there were sufficient practical overlaps for naval commanders to find common ground to work with. Against a background of heavy socialising, officers of the China Station and Asiatic Fleet saw each-other as comrades in arms, right up to the most senior positions of command. For all the diplomatic posturing over the official stances taken over China, and top-level antagonism between the two navies, events on the scene were quite different.[217] While there was a general understanding between the foreign powers that their gunboats would assist each-other, the Anglo-American bond came with an expectation of unfettered assistance. For Britain, the impact of that close relationship was similar to that of a force multiplier, enabling the China Station to achieve more comprehensive protective coverage across the Treaty Ports without an increase in its own vessels.

[215] Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire,* pp.202-204.
[216] Map of Shanghai, 1919, TNA, MR 1/758.
[217] Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars.*

Summary - Intertwined tales

The military situation in East Asia during the 1920s was based around a dynamic series of relationships, which changed over the years and not always along a linear progression. As a result, it would be incorrect to focus too heavily on a narrative of declining relations between Japan and its Anglo-American rivals. Assistance was sought and rendered in both directions between Britain and Japan throughout the decade, although it was increasingly tempered by mutual suspicion and conflicting priorities in China. Events on the mainland in East Asia, however, had far greater influence on the grand strategy between the major powers than just that of a playing field for the conflict of interests.

The plan that was proposed repeatedly by the Royal Navy's regional commanders that Whitehall should seek an understanding with China, or at least some of its leading warlords, as a means to counter Japanese aggression may never have come to pass. Events in China dictated that the British government was unable, or less willing, to pursue such an informal alliance. Based upon the various arguments made over the decade, however, the Admiralty's belief that China would be on the same side as Britain in any conflict with Japan supported the decision to continue actively defending Hong Kong. The maintenance of significant naval forces around and at Hong Kong was as much to do with China as it was Japan, and with potential Chinese support its defence was far from 'untenable' during the 1920s, even if it became so in later years.[218] Gunboat flotillas and a single cruiser squadron were no real threat to the IJN, but they were sufficient to deter the threat of organised violence in China. Moreover, even after being reinforced by the battle fleet in the event of a war with Japan, Hong Kong was still primarily seen as a base that enabled offensive operations in and around China. Cutting the flow of raw materials and foodstuffs from Shanghai and the Yangtze was expected to prove a far more effective blockade strategy than attempting to impose a comprehensive cordon around the Japanese mainland itself.

Britain's relationship with China was also influenced at times by strategic developments between the major powers in East Asia. The declining value of Weihai as a refuelling base to enable naval operations in North East Asia, and its exposed position to a potential Japanese attack, played a role in the decision to return the territory to Chinese sovereignty. Equally

[218] John Ferris, *The Evolution of British Strategic Policy 1919-1926,* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p.186.

growing concern about Japan in the last years of the decade does seem to have played a part in fostering willingness on the part of the Royal Navy and British authorities in general to try to work with the Guomindang. In both cases, however, geo-strategic priorities were reliant upon changes in the local environment to enable those negotiations to take place.

While the narrative of Britain's interwar relationship with Japan broadly holds true in China, even if it was complicated by local events, the situation with the other major powers was more complicated and does not fit so easily with top-level developments. Informal arrangements between not only individual warships in isolated areas, but also all the way up the chain of command to the regional Admirals, often stood in contrast to official government policies. This was particularly true for USN vessels and marines, which at times committed themselves to actions well beyond their orders. Royal Navy commanders and those of France's *Marine Nationale* also made similar decisions, acting in collaboration with their counterparts to help maintain western interests in East Asia. There were still some exceptions, notably Vice-Admiral Tyrwhitt and Admiral Leveson, who were less enthusiastic about working so closely with perceived rivals. Anglo-American cooperation was widespread and generally acknowledged by the two navies as part of life on the peacetime front-line in China. Truly understanding the power dynamics at play in China during the 1920s requires an acknowledgment of that difference between what was said and agreed at a top-level, particularly when it was conducted thousands of miles away, and what actually occurred on the ground.

Those informal agreements made at a local level sometimes had wide reaching repercussions. On a day-to-day basis it, in effect, increased the Royal Navy's protective and patrol coverage on the Yangtze and around the Chinese coast. That additional support was particularly appreciated during anti-British protests and boycotts in the middle of the decade, when American neutrality meant USN warships were better received during unrest at ports than those flying the White Ensign. Without that support, the Admiralty would have had to consider diverting resources from elsewhere or demand additional funding from the Treasury. With the Navy's budget already under significant pressure after the First World War, neither of those were popular prospects. Similarly, at times of crisis, US military resources helped Britain extend its reach a little further, enabling a task force to be

despatched to Wanxian in 1926 and freeing the 12th Royal Marine Battalion from guarding the International Settlement at Shanghai in 1927.

The bonds of friendship and camaraderie formed between the officers and men of the China Station and Asiatic Fleet, during their service in and around China, also played an important role in further developing Britain's grand strategy for a war with Japan. Behind all the strategic debates and calculations was an almost unwavering belief of a minimum of tacit support from America in the event of such a conflict.[219] This fed into Britain's war plans, with either 'sympathetic' or 'benevolent' neutrality expected, as a minimum, from the US armed forces.[220] There remained an underlying assumption that a direct conflict with Japan was unlikely in the near future, but should the worst happen the Royal Navy felt that its blockade efforts would be supported by the US. Likewise, it seems likely that Britain anticipated that the Asiatic Fleet would extend its protection to British civilians around China, given the plans for Royal Navy gunboats to fall back rapidly on Hong Kong, based upon their pattern of doing so during smaller crises.

The situation in East Asia in the 1920s involved a complicated web of relationships between the various countries with interests in the region. Japan's growing power and its eventual shift towards an increasingly aggressive foreign policy after 1927 was a significant influencing factor in the Royal Navy's strategy. Up until and including 1927, however, those factors were not the only, or indeed even the primary, influences on regional events. The instability in China was arguably the biggest influence upon Britain's relationship with the other major powers. Concerns about Japanese intentions were over-ridden by operational priorities in China, and the desire to secure Chinese support against potential Japanese attack was hindered by the lack of a friendly regime with whom Britain could negotiate. Likewise, the other major powers' navies, particularly those from America and France, operated at times in conflict with the official foreign policies of their governments as a result of what the local commanders saw as mutual interests in China. The Royal Navy's presence in East Asia during the 1920s, as its title suggested, was focused on events in China. It was that country, and the events occurring within its borders, that the Admiralty felt would

[219] Neilson, 'Japan, Maritime Power and British Imperial Defence', p.66.
[220] War orders issued to Commander in Chief Atlantic Fleet and Foreign Stations, August 1924, TNA, ADM 116/3125; Vice-Admiral W. Kelly to Admiralty, 19 January 1932, TNA, ADM 116/3118.

decide the security of the British Empire. The Singapore strategy and a perceived direct threat from Japan only really started to take centre-stage at the very end of the decade, and even then the decisions made relied upon assumptions about the future of China. Ultimately, events in China also provided Britain's far eastern fleet with most of its day-to-day work, and as we shall soon explore those challenges also led to one of the largest-ever peacetime deployments of Royal Navy warships east of Suez.

Chapter Two: Adapting to a new China in a violent peace

The complicated web of international relationships spun across 1920s East Asia was caught in a whirlwind of developments. In eight short years between 1911 and 1919 the British Empire and China in particular underwent a series of significant transformative events. Britain was one of the many countries deeply affected by the First World War. In China, the Xinhai Revolution had triggered a wave of subsequent changes in political environment. The influence those events had on Britain's relationship with China was delayed to some extent, given pressing domestic and other international concerns. Nonetheless, they started to really make their mark as the world returned to relative peace in 1919. This chapter will explore what impact the revolutions in China and the First World War had upon Britain's approach to one of the key powers in East Asia. This will enable an evaluation of what effect the new environment had upon the Royal Navy's priorities for the region and conversely what role the navy had in Britain's relationship with China during the 1920s. In addition, it will provide a better understanding of the relative influence of the First World War, upon regional events well away from the front lines in Europe and the Middle East.

The direct impact of the First World War on the China Station was both modest and temporary. After Admiral Graf Spee's cruiser squadron departed the region in 1914, on an eventful voyage culminating in its destruction at the Battle of the Falkland Islands, East Asia was left largely untouched by the naval war.[1] As a result, vessels and crews were redeployed west to the conflict zones, with many of the China Station's gunboats moored unmanned at Hong Kong and Shanghai. Shortly before the return to general peace in Europe, and the subsequent scuttling of the German Fleet at Scapa Flow, that process was slowly reversed. By October 1919, most of the China Station's peacetime complement had been restored, with the process completed in early 1920.[2] Just as with the elimination of Russia's Pacific Fleet during the Russo-Japanese War 1904-05, the removal of Germany's East Asia Squadron only re-ordered the local balance of power.[3] It did not fundamentally change the

[1] Overlack, 'The Force of Circumstance', 661-662.
[2] Navy List, October 1919, (1919), NLS, p.562.
[3] Peter Padfield, *Rule Britannia: The Victorian and Edwardian Navy*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp.215-222; Bell, 'Our Most Exposed Outpost', 61.

Royal Navy's desire to project power into the region, particularly on China's coast and waterways, where Britain's gunboats resumed their peacetime imperial duties.

Instead, the First World War had an indirect, but long-lasting, effect upon the China Station and the British Empire in East Asia. Financial cutbacks, greater political focus on domestic problems, and changes in attitude towards both the Empire and the use of military violence, all influenced the Royal Navy as a global entity. The relatively subtle, gradual changes to the China Station that resulted from those factors stood in stark contrast to what had been happening in China during that period.

The Royal Navy's return to meet a new China

Entering the 1920s China was not a single unified country. In late 1911, the Qing regime finally succumbed to its long-term faults and weakness. A premature and relatively amateur attempt to provoke a revolution in Wuhan, sparked a series of events that soon shattered the illusion of Qing control over China.[4] The Qing authorities' failure to respond effectively to what was initially a localised crisis, ultimately led to it developing into a nationwide movement - the Xinhai Revolution, which destroyed the Qing regime's frail domestic legitimacy.[5] Subsequent attempts to form a Republic of China failed, due to the inability of a single leader to exercise sufficient economic, military, or political power over the whole country. As a result, effective domestic power within China transferred to a collection of regional warlords.[6] No single warlord or faction was able to build the monopoly of violence or an effective enough bureaucracy necessary to maintain control over more than its immediate region. As a result, the various warlords fought a series of civil wars, over the course of the following two decades. Estimates suggest a cumulative total of up to 400 individual conflicts fought during the full warlord era.[7]

1920s China may have been highly fragmented politically, but as a whole its geographic area remained broadly in line with the boundaries that existed for the Qing and those eventually inherited by Mao's Communist regime.[8] China was still regarded as a single national entity

[4] Bickers, *Scramble for China,* pp.362-365; Sheridan, *China in Disintegration*, pp.20-48.
[5] Xinhai Revolution also referred to by other names, including: Wuhan/Wuchang Revolution, Revolution of 1911, and the Chinese Revolution.
[6] Andrew J. Nathan, *Peking Politics 1918-1923*, (London: University of California Press, 1976), pp.190-200.
[7] Sheridan, *China in Disintegration*, p.88.
[8] Osterhammel, 'China', p.646.

at the time by many international observers as well as by the more powerful warlords, who in some cases aspired to become the new sole ruler of the country.[9] Indeed, as concepts of nationalism gained wider understanding and acceptance among the ordinary population, there was a contradictory shift. More of China's 400 million inhabitants believed in and came to see the nation as a single political entity, even if in practice the country had moved further away from that reality.

For the British diplomats and naval officers whose duties involved East Asia, contemporary reports show that there was a tendency to simplify the situation by focusing upon the two powerful northern (Beiyang) and southern (Guomindang) factions.[10] That simplification was not unique to British officials. Indeed, many of the weaker warlords would at times nominally ally themselves with one of the two leading factions.[11] There were specific circumstances when the British did consider the situation in greater detail. A 1927 RAF report, for example, on military aircraft in China examined seven main warlords' forces: the three northern clique leaders, two sub-divisions of the Guomindang, the governor of Yunnan, and the 'Dogmeat General' - Zhang Zongchang.[12] Despite acknowledging those divisions, however, the same British officials only officially recognised and negotiated with the representatives of the supposedly ruling Chinese Republic. That government apparatus was normally controlled by the leaders of the northern faction occupying Beijing.[13] This complicated Britain's relationship with China, as the northern leaders sometimes attempted to use international negotiations to their advantage in the domestic sparring. During negotiations between Chinese representatives and Britain's Foreign Office about famine relief, for example, the northern-led Chinese proposals would have seen the southern warlords shouldering the burden of debt repayments to international creditors.[14] In-fighting within the cliques further complicated the situation. There were four changes in president

[9] Transcript of a debate in House of Lords about the situation in China, 5 August 1925, TNA, FO 371/10922. Fung, *The Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, p.48.
[10] E.g. Memoranda on the Political and Military Situation in China, 1924-1929, TNA, FO 228/2929. Foreign Office correspondence about the situation in China and China's relationship with the League of Nations, 1927-1928, TNA, FO 228/3882. War Diaries of 12th RMB on service in China, 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8709/102.
[11] Nathan, *Peking Politics*, pp.150-152.
[12] RAF intelligence report on the Chinese air forces, 1927, TNA, AIR 5/865.
[13] V. Wellesley, Memorandum for Cabinet detailing Britain's policy towards China, 23 November 1926, TNA, CAB 24/182/24.
[14] Memorandum from Lampson to Foreign Office regarding the situation in China, October 1927, TNA, FO 228/3882.

and twelve different premiers of the Beijing authorities alone, during the period 1916-1924.[15]

To many a contemporary observer this collapse of central governance and the subsequent sustained period of violence, with no clear new leader or regime in sight, might have heralded the start of a more dangerous era for China. In reality, the assessment by the Foreign Office and Admiralty, as stated in the House of Lords by the Earl of Gosford, Archibald Acheson, in August 1925, was that little had changed. Acheson argued that under the Qing, day-to-day order had long been maintained by regional power brokers, and China's core power structure was built around 'the family, the village, and the province'.[16] This was perhaps a reasonable summary of the situation. Research by Wen-hui Tsai and James Sheridan has demonstrated that there was considerable continuity of ruling elites between the Qing and warlord eras with effective governance mainly taking place on a regional level.[17] Indeed, in nine of the fifteen regions to declare independence in 1911 it was the existing elites that led the events, to secure or enhance their existing power.[18] This continuity of local Chinese officials, along with a willingness in the British authorities to co-operate with them, fed into a general maintenance of the status quo in and around the treaty ports immediately after the Xinhai Revolution.[19] It was not until the early 1920s that that *modus vivendi* started to break down, changing the relationship between the two countries.

Indeed, Britain's stance towards China in the 1920s was not only based around the attitude that the Xinhai Revolution and subsequent warlord conflicts were part of a pattern of disorder and decentralised politics. British officials throughout the decade often considered China as being incapable of producing an effective national government, through a mixture of cultural, ideological, and racial arguments. The head of the British legation in Beijing Sir Miles Lampson, for example, informed Whitehall that negotiations over debt repayments in 1928 were difficult as he felt that Chinese officials were 'quite inexperienced and politically

[15] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.22.
[16] Transcript of speech by Earl of Gosford, 5 August 1925, TNA, FO 371/10922.
[17] Wen-Hui Tsai, *Patterns of Political Elite Mobility in Modern China 1912-1949*, (Hong Kong: Chinese Material Centre, 1983), pp.238-244.
[18] Sheridan, *China in Disintegration*, pp.37-46.
[19] Transcript of speech by Earl of Gosford, 5 August 1925, TNA, FO 371/10922; Osterhammel, 'China', pp.648-650.

incompetent'.[20] This was something of a feature in Lampson's memoranda, in which he reported that the decisions made by the leaders of the factions were often reckless, with apparent lack of thought of the potential consequences. Lampson felt that this was not because those individuals did not understand what the consequences were. Instead he argued that it was because all too frequently they acted in their own self-interest, with no sense of responsibility for the wider consequences. This fed through to the Foreign Office and therefore Whitehall's understanding of each group's goals, such as during Lampson's assessment of Guomindang's focus upon short term goals in its relationship with Japan. He felt this was extremely dangerous because if it became 'a question of national honour with Japan - well God help the Chinese! And yet they are deliberately running that risk!'[21]

Even with such dismissive views, Lampson and his Foreign Office colleagues were often at the softer end of the scale in their attitude towards Chinese officials and population. The 'Shanghailander' community of foreign settlers in the Shanghai International Settlement, predominantly of British origin, provided far less favourable reports. This included arguments that under Chinese rule foreigners would be at risk of being decapitated or worse, and there was the potential for a new Boxer Rebellion.[22] Robert Bickers and Nicholas Clifford in particular have explored how the Shanghailander's fearful and aggressive rhetoric resulted from the community's sense of racial superiority and inability to understand the changes in culture occurring in 1920s China.[23] The relatively rapid emergence of mass nationalism in the aftermath of the Xinhai Revolution, did not fit with the established racial profile that British officials expected from Chinese people.[24] Jürgen Osterhammel describes it as the point when 'the Chinese had suddenly ceased being docile and deferential', at least in the way they were seen by the British.[25]

[20] Telegram from Lampson to Foreign Office regarding situation in China, January 1928, TNA, FO 228/3882. In the draft copy of his memo, Lampson was even stronger in his criticism of the Chinese officials, but the language was toned down in the official cable to London.
[21] Memorandum from Lampson to Hubbard, January 1929, TNA, FO 228/2929.
[22] Bickers, *Empire Made Me*, p.174.
[23] Shu-Mei Shih, 'Gender, Race, and Semicolonialism: Liu Na'ou's Urban Shanghai Landscape', *Journal of Asian Studies* 55/4 (1996), 939-941; Phoebe Chow, *British Opinion and Policy towards China, 1922-1927,* (unpublished Ph.D., LSE, 2011), pp.50-54; Clifford, 'A Revolution is not a Tea Party', 514.
[24] Daniel O. Spence, *Colonial naval culture and British imperialism 1922-67*, (Manchester: MUP, 2015), pp.155-181; Lipkin, *Useless to the State*, pp.1-9.
[25] Osterhammel, 'China', p.651.

The Xinhai Revolution was a primary driver of that political and social transformation, but the First World War had also had a significant impact upon China's view of the world around it. Of particular importance to its relationship with the British Empire, were Japan's Twenty-One Demands and the 1919 peace treaties. The announcement on 18 January 1915 by the Japanese foreign ministry demanding that China effectively become a Japanese protectorate had two significant impacts upon the region. Somewhat unsurprisingly it caused widespread outrage among the Chinese population, when details were made public. Coming as a surprise with no forewarning, the initial move and later ultimatum also soured Britain's relationship with its Asian ally. [26] Distracted by the on-going global conflict, the resulting surge in nationalist sentiment within China and how it might affect Britain's imperial interests was not necessarily immediately clear, but was later revealed as a result of the 1919 peace settlements. The decision taken at Versailles to award Germany's former concessions in Shandong to Japan, rather than return them to Chinese sovereignty, sparked a wave of protests in what became known as the May Fourth Movement.[27] While that movement was not necessarily fervently anti-foreign, there was considerable anger over Britain's support of the move and failure to recognise China's contribution to the war effort.[28] 140,000 Chinese labourers worked in Europe during the final year of the war, of whom 2,000 were buried in French graveyards.[29] Claims that British influence brought investment and development sounded increasingly hollow against that burning sense of injustice and betrayal.

It is also worth noting the significant scale and pace of change occurring in China at the time, which confused and confounded many British observers, and went far beyond the influence of conflict and revolution. When Commander Cedric Holland returned to East Asia in 1928, for example, he noted with near shock how in just fifteen years the local women had undergone a complete transformation. Gone were the squeezed, bound feet and subservient attitudes. Instead the ladies were freely socialising and dining at previously

[26] Chen, 'May Fourth Movement', 137-138; Osterhammel, 'China', pp.645-646; Gowen, 'Great Britain and the Twenty-One Demands',.87-89.
[27] Chen, 'May Fourth Movement', 142;
[28] Osterhammel, 'China', pp.649-650.
[29] Johnathan Clements, '23 August 1914: Japan declares war on Germany', in *June 28th: Sarajevo 1914 – Versailles 1919: The War and Peace That Made the Modern World*, ed. by Alan Sharp (London: Haus, 2014), p.241.

male-only restaurants providing, as Holland noted with apparent pleasure, 'most intelligent' conversation.[30] Whatever Holland precisely meant is open for debate, but the rapid social change he highlighted is very clear from his account.

Against that backdrop, understanding in Whitehall of warlord China was formed around a picture of long-term weak leadership, inconsistent decisions, and chaotic developments.[31] As a result, Britain's official stance was that peace and stability were unlikely to return to China in the foreseeable future, and so Britain should try to maintain a position of neutrality and non-intervention.[32] Arthur Waldron has suggested that this 'complacent' non-committal strategy resulted from Britain, along with many of the other major powers, not fully appreciating how significant the changes in China would be for their East Asian policies.[33] British politicians were also heavily concerned with domestic issues during the 1920s, and so events in Asia were therefore of a lower priority.[34] Bernard Porter goes so far as to argue that Stanley Baldwin, Prime Minister from 1924 to 1929, was uninterested in the Empire as his government 'had more important matters on their plates', particularly the 1926 General Strike.[35] In either case, the two causes were in many ways interlinked, and resulted in a political focus upon domestic rather than East Asian imperial issues. A key exception to Britain's strategy of non-intervention, however, was that it should be maintained only as long as British interests were not directly threatened by the domestic sparring in China. There appears to have been a general consensus of support for taking that approach and it formed a core tenet of Foreign Secretary Sir Austen Chamberlain's statements to the House of Commons towards the latter part of the decade.[36]

During the first half of the 1920s, China's main regional warlords honoured the agreements made by the Qing with Britain, such as the extra-territorial privileges held by the International Settlements, helping to avoid a British or multi-national military response.[37] In addition, the regions in which Great Britain had most interest, particularly the treaty ports

[30] Diary of Commander Cedric Holland, 1928, National Maritime Museum (NMM), HND 2/4/1.
[31] Robert Bickers, 'Shanghailanders: The Formation and Identity of the British Settler Community in Shanghai 1843-1937', *Past and Present* 159 (1998), 204-210.
[32] Transcript of debate in House of Lords, 5 August 1925, TNA, FO 371/10922.
[33] Waldron, *From War to Nationalism*, pp.161-162.
[34] Akira Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, (Harlow: Longman, 1987), p.19.
[35] Bernard Porter, *The Absent Minded Imperialists*, (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp.257-272.
[36] Memoranda and speeches from Chamberlain, 1927-1928, TNA, FO 228/3882.
[37] Osterhammel, 'China', p.648.

of Shanghai, Guangzhou (Canton), Nanjing and Tianjin (Tientsin), were less affected by actual fighting, prior to the start of the Northern Expedition. Nonetheless it was a new and different China that the Royal Navy encountered as it returned to East Asia. Distracted by domestic concerns and generally unaffected by the on-going civil conflict, the British government assumed a non-committal neutral posture in China prior to 1925. In essence, Britain's politicians hoped that China would be reunified by a favourable regime, with whom it would be possible to work to protect and maintain the British Empire's interests.[38]

Britain's changing interests in China

The British Empire's primary interest in 1920s China remained largely unchanged from the Opium Wars, when the country was forcibly opened to western trade, in the mid-nineteenth century. As a major trading nation, the British government sought to maintain and where possible expand the opportunities for trade in China whether proactively or following pressure from British companies. This trade was based around the cities along China's coast and major rivers, particularly a few key centres such as Shanghai and Guangzhou. Between the late nineteenth century and the 1920s, railways and modern roads had spread across China, but the web remained very thin, with the 5,237 miles of railway track only roughly equal to Britain's network in the 1850s.[39] As a result, China was still very much a littoral mercantile economy, with its rivers, canals and coastline remaining the main arteries for trade.[40] British businesses dominated international trade with China prior to the First World War, and were heavily engrained in that overall littoral economy. Long-term advantages in modern bulk transport shipping and trade finance, backed by the powerful Royal Navy, had allowed shipping firms such as Jardine Matheson and Co., to out-manoeuvre their rivals. Many British companies had also invested heavily in building local factories in many of the key cities, much of which was constructed prior to the Xinhai Revolution.[41] Investment capital was largely concentrated in a few locations, with Shanghai alone accounting for roughly three-quarters of the £200 million in British investments in China in 1927. Events between 1919 and 1927 increased that concentration in Shanghai, but the city had long

[38] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, pp.6-9; Waldron, *From War to Nationalism,* pp.161-162.
[39] Julian Fenby, *The Penguin History of Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power 1850 to the Present*, (London: Penguin, 2013), p.151.
[40] Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians', 634.
[41] Osterhammel, 'China', pp.654-656.

been a focal point for foreign investment. There were, however, numerous factories, mines, and other business interests located in areas outside of the treaty ports.[42]

The level of British interest in China had been slowly changing in the early twentieth century, however, both on land and afloat. In particular, the First World War interrupted the pattern of global trade and provided a boost to Japanese and American companies looking to export into China. Competition was therefore far higher going into the 1920s, although China remained a significant market for British manufacturers, accounting for over 3% of total exports.[43] In return, the British Empire as a whole was by far China's largest trading partner, accounting for just under half of all Chinese international trade.[44] Patterns of trade were also changing rapidly, with greater focus on consumer goods branding and business networks, particularly working with local firms. This brought into question the long-term value of defending the network of smaller treaty ports and industrial centres such as Jiujiang (Kiukiang).[45] Indeed, as anti-imperialist sentiment grew in China over the 1920s, some British firms supported that growing detachment from formal concessions. British American Tobacco, for example, decided that formal protection risked harming their business operations and damaging their image among Chinese consumers. As Philip Pugh has put it, gunboats might open or keep open markets, but 'Trade requires willing buyers and willing sellers.'[46] As a result, British businesses preferred maintaining a low profile, to try to avoid becoming the focus of protests and boycotts.[47]

Industrial and mercantile firms operating in China were not the only ones at stake from threats posed by the disorder in China. British financial institutions had significantly increased their exposure to the Chinese economy in the years prior to the First World War.[48] A high proportion of the railways in southern and eastern China, for example, were financed with long term loans by British bondholders, such as the section of the Jinghu Railway

[42] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.4; Osterhammel, 'Imperialism in Transition', 266-268.
[43] Flux, 'British Export Trade', p.552; Harumi Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain in Shanghai 1925-31,* (London, 1995), pp.13-45.
[44] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.5.
[45] China Station: list of incidents and important questions 1925-1932, TNA, ADM 1/8756/137; Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.114; Osterhammel, 'China', p.653.
[46] Philip Pugh, *The Cost of Seapower*, (London: Conway, 1986), p.67.
[47] Osterhammel, 'Imperialism in Transition', 267-275.
[48] Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians', 633.

between Shanghai and Nanjing, constructed in 1903.[49] Britain's exposure to these investments should not be overstated, however, as Ian Phimister has illustrated how the capital raised in some cases came from European investors, with the British financiers merely acting as intermediaries. It was not British money that was actually at stake when those assets were at risk. However, that was often of little consequence in practice, as the Foreign Office was generally only aware that the paper trail went through London and did not know who owned the investments.[50]

As with global trade, the First World War had also interrupted global monetary flows and disrupted both Britain's financial influence over China and its nominal exposure to the market. The Beijing government alone took out almost CH$1bn in foreign loans between 1916 and 1926, mostly with Japanese banks.[51] In addition, a considerable amount of borrowing had been undertaken by other warlords, with China's total external debts rising as high as CH$2.2bn by 1925. As that debt and the interest payments required to service it soared, there was a growing risk that the loans would go into default. This was particularly true given the turmoil in the country, with the debtor governments, warlords, and companies unable to generate significant, stable incomes. A mass-default had the potential to cause a financial crisis in the City of London.

The British government were aware, however, that there was some flexibility in the degree of instability that could be tolerated before such a scenario might come to fruition. Loans issued by British financiers were generally secured against either tangible assets, such as railways, or customs revenues.[52] The over-riding concern for the British government was therefore to avoid a complete collapse of order in China that would result in both widespread loan defaults and loss of access to those securities. France was in a similar position, through a mixture of direct investment in the pre-war Chinese railway drive, and indirect ownership of British arranged loans.[53] As a result, French financiers owned roughly

[49] Hansard, 23rd May 1927, vol.206, cc.1639-41; Chen Qianping, 'Foreign investment in modern China: An analysis with a focus on British interests', in *Britain and China, 1840-1970: Empire, finance and war*, ed. by Robert Bickers and Jonathan J. Howlett (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.153.
[50] Ian Phimister, 'Foreign Devils, Finance and Informal Empire: Britain and China c. 1900-1912', *Modern Asian Studies* 40/3 (2006), 737-759.
[51] Hsi-Sheng Ch'I, *Warlord Politics in China 1916-1928,* (Stanford: SUP, 1976), pp.157-158.
[52] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, p.95.
[53] Phimister, 'Foreign Devils', 739.

one-quarter of China's secured foreign debt.[54] This position was aided by British control of China's Customs Service, enabling considerable influence over ensuring that Chinese government repayments continued, a key source of debt servicing for British financiers.[55] Likewise, a contemporary assessment by the China Association indicates that most corporate loans were also still being honoured, with over one quarter of all long-term British loans to Chinese railways, by value, having been repaid by the end of 1926.[56] Admittedly, there was considerable variety between different regions, with some railways effectively bankrupt due to levies imposed by local warlords.[57] However, the crucial point is that even with the regional conflicts, economic trouble, and general instability in China after 1911, most loans managed by British entities were slowly being repaid.

In contrast to Britain and France, the Japanese government had guaranteed the largely unsecured ¥145 million 'Nishihara' loans, issued to the Beiyang faction, leaving Japan liable for the cost should the loans enter default.[58] This meant that the Japanese government was exposed directly to that risk, which in effect tied Japan rigidly into taking a far more active role in Chinese affairs, even if later governments had switched to a dovish foreign policy. Moreover, Japanese financiers in general had greater exposure to unsecured debt provided to Chinese warlords and businesses. The nature of the finance deal was particularly significant in this case, as it meant that Japan had no financial reason for restraint when in 1928 the Northern Expedition threatened the warlords and railways that the Japanese loans had financed.[59]

Underneath all the monetary and business concerns was the human dimension. There were thousands of British civilians living and working in China, whose safety was a concern for the British authorities. Mirroring the location of business investment, the majority were resident in Shanghai's International Settlement, although there were smaller communities at many other treaty ports. Shanghai's British population had continued increasing slowly in the

[54] Osterhammel, 'China', p.644.
[55] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.23.
[56] Annual Report by the China Association, 1927, SOAS Special Collections, CHAS/A/08.
[57] Speech made by S.H. Strawn – Chairman of the International Commission on Extraterritorial Jurisdiction in China, 7 December 1926, SOAS Special Collections, CHAS/A/08; Donald S. Sutton, *Provincial militarism and the Chinese Republic*, (Michigan, 1980), p.281.
[58] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, p.95.
[59] Madeleine Chi, 'Bureaucratic Capitalists in Operation: Ts'ao Ju-lin and His New Communications Clique, 1916-1919', *Journal of Asian Studies* 34/3 (1975), 680-682.

1910s, partly driven by children being born to existing families. While those expatriates retained significant formal control over key institutions, their overall influence was waning, amid a rapidly changing city (see Figure 6).[60] Shanghai's other European populations were generally in decline after 1914. The German community had almost disappeared during the First World War and the numbers of both Italians and Portuguese were steadily dropping going into the 1920s.[61] In contrast, the American presence had been progressively expanding, in conjunction with US business interests in the region. Likewise, a wave of Russian refugees fleeing the October Revolution had added to the evolving face of the city and disrupted established racial norms.[62] Neither change was anywhere near as significant as Japan's, however, which over a twenty-year period had gone from being a modest number of merchants to the largest foreign community in Shanghai. Britain still had a sizable civilian population in China that it sought to protect, but other countries had a growing and influence over local affairs.

Figure 6: Foreign population of the Shanghai International Settlement 1915-20[63]

	1915	1920	Change
British	4,822	5,341	*11%*
Japanese	7,169	10,215	*42%*
American	1,307	2,264	*73%*
Russian	361	1,266	*251%*
German	1,155	280	*-76%*
Total International Settlement	18,519	23,307	*26%*
Chinese Shanghai	620,401	759,839	*22%*

Note: Does not include the French Concession.

As a result, Whitehall's key priority in protecting the range of British interests in China after the First World War was the maintenance of some semblance of law and order. There was less concern over who it was that provided the desired localised stability. Over the course of the 1920s, but particularly after the launch of the Northern Expedition, Britain had the most day-to-day contact with the Guomindang, which British officials often referred to as the 'southern faction' due to its initial capital at Guangzhou. For the majority of the decade,

[60] Bickers, 'Shanghailanders', 171-178.
[61] Shanghai Municipal Gazette, 18 November 1920, Shanghai Municipal Archives (SMA), U1-1-985; Shanghai Municipal Gazette, 7 August 1924, SMA, U1-1-989.
[62] Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *Global Shanghai, 1850-2010: A History in Fragments,* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2008), pp.71-72.
[63] Shanghai Municipal Gazette, 18 November 1920, SMA, U1-1-985; Letter from the Canadian Trade Commissioner to the Shanghai Municipal Council, 20 August 1918, SMA, U1-2-551.

however, a mixture of the policy of neutrality and a distrust of the Guomindang's links to Soviet Russia, limited Britain's appetite to support any single 'faction'. The British government favoured a unified China, but were content to wait and see who would emerge as the new leader, so long as there were no significant threats to Britain's interests.[64] Lord Curzon, as Foreign Secretary in 1924, even went so far as to criticise a memorandum from Lampson detailing events in the west and far south of China, because he felt that the power struggles in those regions had no direct impact upon the main areas of British interest.

The Royal Navy's growing piracy challenge

While the Xinhai Revolution and subsequent breakdown in centralised control over China had not significantly altered the situation for Britain in relation to its main interests in the country, there were nonetheless new challenges for Whitehall. One area in particular that posed a growing indirect threat was that of piracy. The Foreign Office copied the diplomatic strategy it had used with the Qing, by pressuring the different warlords and factions to deal with the problem, including sometimes offering assistance. The Royal Navy occasionally provided logistical support to Guomindang forces, for example, when local officials were persuaded that it was also in their interests to deal with a particular pirate 'nest'.[65] This low-level co-operation, however, did not have a significant bearing on the overall relationship between Britain and the Guomindang, or other warlords. Indeed, one of the first things agreed by Hong Kong Governor Reginald Stubbs and Guomindang Foreign Minister Chén Yǒurén (Eugene Chen) when discussing the issue in 1924 was that such co-operation would be 'a strictly informal' arrangement.[66] Nor did it ultimately have a significant impact upon reducing the level of piracy in Chinese waters. With diplomatic efforts hampered and ineffective, the Admiralty was ordered to take responsibility for dealing with the threat posed to British shipping in the region. The changes that had occurred in China between 1911 and 1919, particularly during the period when global attention was transfixed on the

[64] Waldron, *From War to Nationalism,* pp.161-162.
[65] Minutes of meeting of Committee for Overseas Defence discussing piracy in China, June 1926, TNA, CAB 24/181/72; Memorandum from Sir Miles Lampson to the Foreign Office regarding the history of Britain's efforts in piracy suppression on the Chinese coast, 21 September 1927, CAB 24/202/24.
[66] Memorandum from Sir Miles Lampson to the Foreign Office regarding the history of Britain's efforts in piracy suppression on the Chinese coast, 21 September 1927, TNA CAB 24/202/24, p.13.

First World War, had produced a new environment and set of challenges for the Royal Navy to deal with.

While piracy and wider banditry has featured regularly in accounts of the period, there has been relatively little work done on what it actually entailed.[67] Anti-piracy operations that went wrong in catastrophic style have seen considerable discussion, given the impact they had on anti-British sentiment in China. In particular, there were incidents on the boundary between piracy and diplomatic infringements on Britain's extra-territorial rights, which involved local Chinese troops and led to major clashes. The Royal Navy's bombardment of Wanxian in September 1926, for example, during a botched rescue of two hijacked British merchant vessels, has featured in most accounts of Britain's relationship with 1920s China.[68] The day-to-day reality was somewhat less dramatic.

With the widespread breakdown in law and order after the Xinhai Revolution and severe droughts negatively impacting the rural economies of large regions, groups of 'pirates' increasingly targeted merchant vessels on the Yangtze and Pearl rivers as well as routes around China's coast.[69] The pirates were a mixture of organised criminal gangs, smaller groups of local brigands, and in some cases simply communities of individuals driven to crime through economic necessity. This resulted in considerable variety in operating methods between the different groups, with some conducting largely amateur attacks, whereas other organised groups ran relatively sophisticated operations. Indeed, there is at least one account of pirates having paid informants in both the Guomindang's army units and aboard the Royal Navy vessels tasked with defeating them. Prior to a planned raid near Guangzhou in June 1925, for example, General Leung had one of his subordinates arrested for passing on information about a raid to a pirate band. After a change of plans, the locally-hired pilot of HMS *Robin* then warned the same group to prepare for the new alternative attack.[70] The length of the maritime trade and transport routes, with numerous bays and

[67] E.g. Bernard D. Cole, *Gunboats and Marines: The United States Navy in China, 1925-1928*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983), p.91; Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue*, p.75; Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower*, pp.193-197; Osterhammel, 'China', pp.648-650.
[68] E.g. Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy,* p.38; Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.132; Murdoch, 'Exploiting Anti-Imperialism', 75; Osterhammel, 'China', p.652.
[69] Minutes of meeting of Committee for Overseas Defence discussing piracy in China, June 1926, TNA, CAB 24/181/72.
[70] Report by Lieutenant C.M. Faure, 10 June 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8683/140.

twists of river, made them difficult to police without a sizable force of patrol boats. As an example of what was available, for most of the 1920s the Royal Navy only had ten gunboats covering the 1,500 miles of the Yangtze regularly used by British shipping, as well as all its tributaries and interconnected lakes.[71]

For British shipping companies, such as Jardines, the threat of piracy harming trade routes in China was not immediately a major concern given the size of their overall businesses. Losing a few insured cargoes to pirates would not significantly harm their profitability. However, repeated acts of piracy, increased costs from countermeasures and private guards, or a shift in trade to better-protected merchant fleets could all harm their competitiveness over the long term. For the British Empire, it was not just the profitability of such major firms at stake. The regularity with which incidents occurred around Daya (Bias) Bay posed a growing threat to Hong Kong's position as a key trading hub, given it was only thirty-five nautical miles away. As with individual businesses, a few irregular incidents were an acceptable hazard, but a growing pattern of attacks was not. By the middle of 1924, for example, no more than three or four days generally passed between reports of incidents involving piracy, (or labelled as such), on the waterways and coast around Hong Kong.[72]

In dealing with the threat, the volume of trade itself posed a challenge. Given the levels of manpower available to the China Station, it was impossible to simply provide military or police guards for all British vessels travelling along affected routes, although guards were used in some specific instances. Even during a particularly quiet month, for example, somewhere in the region of 100 different merchant ships passed through Nanjing, of which a quarter were British-flagged vessels.[73] With a standard guard contingent of five seamen or marines per ship, roughly 120 personnel would have been required on a regular basis just for the Yangtze River.[74] During a busier phase in the summer of 1928, for example, Rear-Admiral Hugh Tweedie was forced to request additional manpower, with at least 150 men on guard duty – equivalent to the crew of a large destroyer.[75]

[71] Questions in the House of Commons on the situation on the Yangtze, November 1925, TNA, FO 371/10922.
[72] Royal Navy Intelligence Report on Piracy in China, 3 December 1924, TNA, FO 371/10252.
[73] Shipping report for Nanjing, June 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[74] Briefing on Piracy in China for the Committee of Imperial Defence, January 1929, TNA, CAB 24/202/24.
[75] Hugh Tweedie, *The Story of a Naval Life,* (London: Rich & Cowan, 1939), p.250.

With ‘run and hide’ the long-established standard response by pirate groups when faced with professional fighters, such as the Royal Navy, it was rarely possible to tackle the problem on the water.[76] As a result, raids against what were considered pirate ‘nests’ were launched by the Royal Navy, but the sheer scale of the problem and British government concerns that raiding would stir up anti-British feeling both limited the use of such operations.[77] Rear-Admiral William Boyle later recalled that similar raids aimed at uncovering pirates living in normal villages were also unpopular with ordinary British seamen. Trying to unearth and punish criminals living amidst innocent families was not what those seamen had signed up for, and conducting such operations on a regular basis would therefore negatively impact upon morale.[78] Indeed, those British crewmen found the normal punishment for piracy in China – public beheading – extremely distasteful and were sometimes ordered not to intervene when witnessing it being carried out.[79] Problems with existing tactics, the terrain and the ability of suspects to move inland and hide, along with the lack of a central government that could be held responsible, meant that the Royal Navy had to develop new approaches to dealing with piracy.[80]

One element of the piracy problem to develop in the period was relatively unusual, providing a new challenge to the British authorities. There was a steady growth in the number of cases where passengers were hijacking vessels mid-journey, leading to their valuable cargoes being offloaded at pre-arranged locations.[81] These incidents generally took the same format: small groups of hijackers would buy tickets to travel as passengers on vessels, with a selection of small arms concealed on their person or in their luggage. After reaching a quieter point on the journey the infiltrators would reveal their weapons and seize control of the vessel, in some cases using violence against the crew in the process. During one such incident in November 1920, for example, ten passengers aboard the Chinese steamer *Takhing* revealed hidden revolvers shortly after the vessel had left Hong Kong and

[76] Max Boot, ‘Pirates, Then and Now: How Piracy Was Defeated in the Past and Can Be Again’, *Foreign Affairs* 88/4 (2009), 100-102.
[77] Cabinet discussion of Piracy in Bias Bay, 25 November 1926, TNA, CAB 2/4/218.
[78] William Boyle, *Admiral of the Fleet The Earl of Cork and Orrery, My Naval Life: 1886-1941*, (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1942), pp.145-146.
[79] Interview with A. Gaskin, 1986, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 9344, Reel 6, 11 minutes.
[80] Osterhammel, ‘China’, pp.648-650.
[81] Minutes of meeting of Committee for Overseas Defence discussing piracy in China, June 1926, TNA, CAB 24/181/72; Assorted memoranda on piracy in Chinese waters, 1929, TNA, CAB 24/202/24; Anonymous, 'China, Its Past and Present Situation, April 1928', *The Naval Review* 16/3 (1928), p.464.

seized control of the vessel. Three boats containing accomplices then joined the steamer, with the captain Cheung Fat forced to steer his ship in a failed attack on a second vessel, before taking it to Pakshawan Bay (Hebe Haven). The cargo of fourteen cases of sugar and a variety of ammunition crates were then offloaded, and the pirates departed.[82] While in that case it resulted in a modest haul and no-one was killed, some attacks yielded goods worth tens of thousands of dollars and others in multiple deaths.[83] In cases where there were no goods that could be readily removed, hostages were occasionally taken for ransom. Mr J. Rasmussen of the Asiatic Petroleum Company experienced just such a fate in November 1921, although no details were made public of the ransom payment presumably made to secure his release.[84] In a later example in 1928, bribes and ransoms made to secure the release of crewmembers from one merchant steamship added up to a total of $2,437 during a single journey, enough to pay for a couple of months' worth of fuel oil for the ship.[85]

Hijacking or 'internal piracy' as it was sometimes referred to, was not wholly new to the region, and had first been recorded off the Chinese coast in 1890, when the SS *Namoa* was seized in an incident that caused a significant stir at Hong Kong. It had remained a relatively rare form of piracy under the Qing, however, as foreign pressure applied to local Chinese authorities often resulted in them taking a particularly hard line in punishing those individuals suspected of committing such attacks. Hijacking only became a popular tactic among pirates once that risk was largely removed following the Xinhai Revolution. Its popularity had then soared during the First World War years, through on-going civil strife in China and a reduction in foreign gunboat patrols. By the time the China Station returned to normal duties towards the end of the decade, hijacking had become well established as a popular form of piracy.[86]

As carrying passengers was an important source of income for ship-owners, they were reluctant to risk driving them away by adopting too stringent and potentially invasive security screening measures. Efforts were made to create 'protected bridges' to make it more difficult for pirates to seize control of vessels, but such efforts do not appear to have

[82] *China Mail*, 4 November 1920, p.4.
[83] E.g. The two attacks recorded in the *Hong Kong Telegraph*, 28 October 1925, p.1.
[84] *Hong Kong Daily Press*, 28 November 1921, p.3.
[85] Colin A.G. Hutchison, 'Notes from a Yangtze Diary - November 1927 to February 1929' *The Naval Review*, 17/3 (1929), p.543; Rear Admiral Tweedie to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 28 May 1928, TNA, ADM 116/2624.
[86] R.R. Beauchamp, 'Piracy in the South China Sea II', *The Naval Review* 14/1 (1926), pp.35-39.

proven particularly successful. Metal grilles placed over important windows and hatches, for example, were criticised as both ineffective and going against safety regulations.[87] Despite pressure from the Foreign Office to deal with the problem, the Admiralty nominally considered it to be a matter for the civil authorities in the ports of departure. Pertinently, the instructions issued to the Commander in Chief of the China Station defined piracy as involving 'predatory and violent acts', as opposed to general 'robbery upon the coast'.[88]

The Royal Navy's desire to offload much of the piracy challenge on civil authorities quickly proved to be forlorn. Efforts made by city authorities were ineffectual with pirates continuing to seize vessels even after inspections at British administered ports. Indeed, the Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP) were already struggling to deal with the widespread smuggling of weaponry by passengers in general. Just thirty-five people were caught by the SMP over the course of 1923, for example, although they were found to be carrying 135 pistols and 10,000 rounds of ammunition between them. A key limitation was that the SMP only had authority to conduct searches when passengers came ashore. As a result, the Shanghai Municipal Gazette reported that weapons were quietly being offloaded to passing small local boats on the river, before ships docked and searches could take place.[89] With punishments also as light as five days in jail, the risks to those discovered carrying weapons were minimal, with some even released without charge.[90] While the police in other ports may have had greater success, preventing determined hijackers from successfully concealing the few handguns they might need for an attack was almost impossible. As a result, the Royal Navy was considered by many to be the only force capable of tackling the problem and so the China Station was left with its unwanted task.

Foreign Office correspondence about the piracy problem on the River Yangtze provides an interesting insight into just how reluctant the Royal Navy was about being asked to tackle the problem. Rear-Admiral Crawford Maclachlan, as the senior naval officer on the Yangtze, was placed under considerable pressure from British consuls, both those of junior rank in upper-Yangtze treaty ports and those higher up the chain, such as Sir Ronald Macleay.

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[87] Summary by Chairman L.N. Leefe in the Annual Report of the China Association, 30 September 1925, SOAS Special Collections, CHAS/A/08; Anonymous, 'China, Its Past and Present Situation April 1928', *The Naval Review* 16/3 (1928), p.465.
[88] Instructions issued to the Commander in Chief - China Station, 1 February 1921, TNA, ADM 1/8727/146.
[89] The Municipal Gazette, 24 July 1924, SMA, U1-1-989.
[90] Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1923, SMA, U1-1-936.

Maclachlan politely rebuffed each argument to assign more resources towards tackling the piracy issue, or to request additional men, apparently tendering little or no explanation for his decision.[91] This caused Consul Lancelot Giles to apply pressure to individual gunboat officers. In one case, he successfully convinced Lieutenant Commander Tucker of HMS *Woodlark* to provide armed guards for the SS Changwo.[92] Likewise Macleay also lobbied Admiral Arthur Leveson, in vain, to assign additional men to Maclachlan's command, specifically for counter-piracy duties.[93]

The Admiralty did make requests to the Treasury for funding to replace a few of the aging China gunboats, notably the pre-Boxer Rebellion *Woodcock* and *Woodlark*, to boost the resources available for anti-piracy work on the Yangtze in particular. Those older warships were due for replacement as they were 'in such a bad state that they are really useless for escort duty as they cannot keep pace even with the slowest river steamers.'[94] As a result, they were wholly unsuitable for anti-piracy patrols along their stretches of the Upper Yangtze. In January 1925, for example, four gunboats and five motor boats were included on the Navy's proposed new construction list, intended for the following year.[95] Amid fierce battling in the British establishment over the financing of new warships during this period, however, the order for new gunboats was delayed and the motor boats rejected. It was only after the diplomatic situation in China had changed, and issues more pressing than piracy arose, that the replacements were finally authorised and the first two *Tern* and *Peterel* (sic) eventually launched in 1927.[96] The earlier proposals therefore appear to have been included by the Admiralty more to assuage the Foreign Office, and as a secondary bargaining chip with the Treasury, than out of a genuine desire to improve their counter-piracy capabilities. Just as with two existing gunboats that remained idle at Malta, temporarily forgotten during discussions with the Foreign Office, the Admiralty was reluctant to divert resources to the task.[97]

[91] Report by Consul A. Archer, 23 September 1923, TNA, FO 371/9193/88.
[92] Report by Consul L. Giles, 23 September 1923, TNA, FO 371/9193/88.
[93] Report by Sir R. Macleay, 1 October 1923, TNA, FO 371/9193/88.
[94] Report by Consul L. Giles, 23 September 1923, TNA, FO 371/9193/88.
[95] Memorandum by the First Lord of the Admiralty on the Navy Estimates, 4 February 1925, TNA, CAB 24/171/68.
[96] Chesneau, *All the World's Fighting Ships*, p.78.
[97] Cabinet Meeting Minutes, 15 December 1926, TNA, CAB 23/53/35.

The Royal Navy may have had plenty of previous experience in dealing with pirates that attacked from their own vessels, but there was little precedence for having to counter a threat such as hijacking.[98] This became a prominent feature during the Navy's official, and ultimately unsuccessful, argument that hijacking was an issue for the civil authorities.[99] As a result, not only did the newly reformed, peacetime China Station have to prepare itself quickly for dealing with a surge in piracy, it had to develop an entirely new approach for doing so. On China's rivers, pirates could offload their loot quickly to shore or ferry it away along tributaries, long before the Navy's handful of slow-moving gunboats could reach the location. In some cases, a British gunboat arrived in time only to see pirate launches disappearing rapidly up shallow creeks, making pursuit even more challenging.[100] In such cases, the gunboat would then usually just fire a few blank shells when passing the nearest village as a matter of prestige, to ensure 'that none of this valuable asset is lost'.[101] Likewise, the cruisers and sloops patrolling the coast were not designed or equipped for hostage situations. There were no helicopters or fast-boats with which to transfer marines quickly to the affected vessels. Indeed, in any case a Royal Navy response was almost wholly reliant upon their help being requested in the first place. This was rarely made in a timely manner, if at all, as pirates tended to occupy ships' wireless rooms before mayday signals could be issued. Indeed, Commander Malcom Maxwell-Scott noted in his capacity as Senior Naval Officer on the West River in 1924 that most successful interventions occurred through his gunboats simply 'bumping' into the incidents.[102]

Britain was not the only nation involved in anti-piracy operations on China's waterways during the 1920s. Chinese gunboats themselves did attempt to tackle troublesome pirate groups, particularly those under Guomindang control based out of Guangzhou. This included engaging armed vessels around the Pearl River Delta, as well as raiding pirate camps ashore. In some pre-planned operations, British assistance was sought and provided, with Royal Navy gunboats either actively helping to engage the gangs or passively moored nearby as a background statement of force. One such raid highlights the complicated situations those

[98] R.R. Beauchamp, 'Piracy in the South China Seas', *The Naval Review* 13/4 (1925), p.628.
[99] Memorandum from Sir Miles Lampson to the Foreign Office regarding the history of Britain's efforts in piracy suppression on the Chinese coast, 21 September 1927, TNA CAB 24/202/24.
[100] Unsigned memo on piracy in China, 3 September 1924, TNA, FO 371/10252.
[101] Diary of Paymaster-Commander Hugh Miller, January 1920, IWM, PP/MCR/16.
[102] Commander Maxwell-Scott to Commodore David Anderson, 3 October 1924, TNA, ADM 116/2262.

junior British officers could find themselves in, even with some form of official Chinese support.

In the 1925 operation previously mentioned, which was compromised twice by pirate sympathisers, the British gunboats HMS *Cicala* and *Robin* were authorised to provide support after a request for their help from General Leung. The twice re-planned operation on 10 June led to the arrest of thirty individuals at the village of Songshi, of whom twenty-eight were suspected of being pirates and later tried as such. The gunboats had played a modest role, helping to transport the Chinese troops, and firing two high explosive shells as a show of force.[103] After that success, a second raid was arranged against the village of Wangtong the following day. Lieutenant Commander Victor Alleyne was in overall command aboard *Cicala,* but only the smaller *Robin* was able to navigate the shallow creek leading immediately up to the pirate group's fortified encampment.

Commanded by the twenty-eight-year-old Lieutenant Cyril Faure, *Robin* initially behaved in line with its orders, with its main gun and machineguns used to support the Chinese troops attacking the hill. When General Leung subsequently requested to go ashore, Faure provided him with a bodyguard of ten British sailors. Faure himself also then went ashore and participated in a flanking charge by those sailors to help successfully break the pirate defensive line. Up until that point, *Robin's* comparatively light 6-pounder main gun had fired 144 shells, but to almost no effect against the solid earth banks built around the camp. Having been invited to participate by Leung, Faure's report of the incident suggests that he hoped that his bravery would be praised by senior figures.[104] Instead, he received a rebuke from the Foreign Office, with his superior officer Commodore Anselan Stirling reminding him that British service personnel were forbidden from landing on Chinese soil.[105] Praise from General Leung was sufficient to assuage Foreign Office concerns, and ultimately the Admiralty did issue a brief note of appreciation for both Alleyne and Faure's conduct, two months later.[106] It was a relatively minor infraction by an inexperienced officer, supported by a senior officer, but one that had significant repercussions for both Faure himself and

[103] Report by Lieutenant C.M. Faure, 10 June 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8683/140.
[104] Report by Lieutenant C.M. Faure, 12 June 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8683/140.
[105] Commodore A.J.B. Stirling to Lieutenant C.M. Faure, 19 June 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8683/140.
[106] Commander M. Maxwell-Scott to Commodore A.J.B. Stirling, 16 June 1925, TNA ADM 1/8683/140; Admiralty to Vice-Admiral Edwyn Alexander-Sinclair, 31 August 1925, TNA ADM 1/8683/140.

wider Anglo-Chinese relations. Faure responded extremely badly to the criticism directed at his actions and a month later played a pivotal role in the Shaji massacre, resulting in dozens of deaths, an incident that will be explored in chapter four.

While the collaboration between General Leung and British forces in 1925 was apparently relatively successful at dealing with specific groups, such attempts had limited success overall. In particular, those efforts were often undermined by problems the Guomindang had in being able to pay their naval staff. As a result, their gunboats were often left for long periods sitting idle in port, and at other points the crews strayed towards the temptation to join forces with the pirates themselves.[107] In one case on 19 June 1924, for example, some of the *Kwang Tsi's* crew mutinied and rendezvoused with a pirate band, offloading the gunboats' machine guns and ammunition.[108] On balance therefore, collaboration with local Chinese authorities appears to have generally had a negligible impact upon the level of piracy.

Alongside the sporadic work conducted with local Chinese forces, the Royal Navy also interacted with warships from numerous other naval powers operating in the region. The primary location where their work overlapped was on the Yangtze River, where ten Japanese, eight American, and five French gunboats were regularly on patrol.[109] During the 1910s there had been a significant increase in the number of gunboats from other foreign nations on the Yangtze. For example, the USN 'Yangtze Patrol', officially reformed as a separate command in 1921, acquired two brand new gunboats in 1914 capable of traversing the Ichang rapids and gorges to reach the upper stretches of the river.[110] Growing American naval influence was broadly beneficial in terms of British concerns about piracy on China's waterways. Co-operation with the American gunboats was commonplace, given a shared language and similar concerns about the safe flow of trade.[111] One British Acting-Consul, A.P. Blunt, went so far as to state that co-operation with the American naval forces was 'whole hearted' and 'went without question'.[112] There were differences in diplomatic

[107] Wright, *China's Steam Navy*, p.141.
[108] Royal Navy Intelligence Report on Piracy in China, 3 December 1924, TNA, FO 371/10252.
[109] Osterhammel, 'China', p.647.
[110] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* pp.65-66.
[111] Memorandum on the views of the former US ambassador to China, 1925, TNA, CAB 24/174/18; Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East,* p.5.
[112] Memorandum from A.P. Blunt to Foreign Office, 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8707/219.

approach to China, but day-to-day river policing was seen as mutually beneficial. Likewise, co-ordination of effort also occurred with the French navy, such as a scheme in 1926 for Royal Navy and Marine Nationale vessels to conduct gunnery drills regularly in Daya Bay, as a joint demonstration of force.[113]

Cooperation with the Imperial Japanese Navy, even when dealing with the threat of piracy, was slightly more complicated. This thesis will go into greater detail about the relationship in chapter four, along with those with other powers, but specifically in terms of anti-piracy work there was some collaboration between the two navies. The gradual breakdown in Anglo-Japanese relations during and immediately after the First World War, leading ultimately to the non-renewal of the two nations' alliance in 1921, meant that interactions were not as cooperative as they once had been.[114] As the years went by, wider British geo-strategic concerns about the possibility of a future war with Japan tended to surpass the possible anti-piracy benefits from formal co-operation with the second largest naval force on China's waterways. In effect, growing support from the USN was counterbalanced by declining cooperation with the IJN. Overall, international assistance did little to help Britain with its conundrum over what to do with the surge in piracy, particularly around Hong Kong.

The piracy problem in China was made all the more complicated by the emergence of anti-British strikes and boycotts after the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925. In theory, the boycott of British goods by the Chinese population in the aftermath of heavy-handed policing of a protest should have little in common with piracy. In practice, however, the two were interlinked in the minds of British officials and Royal Navy officers. Part of the reason for the blurred boundaries relates to incidents where boycott picketers detained, or attempted to detain, British shipping attempting to dock in ports like Guangzhou. Hong Kong's Governor Cecil Clementi argued forcefully in a report to the Foreign Office in 1926, for example, that there should be no debate over the treatment of picketers as pirates. Clementi felt that they were 'brigands' who were also feared by the general Chinese population.[115] It did not help that some pirate groups were reported to consist of former soldiers from Guomindang

[113] Memoranda in appendix to meeting of Committee for Overseas Defence discussing piracy in China, June 1926, TNA, CAB 24/181/72.
[114] Everest-Phillips, 'The Pre-War Fear of Japanese Espionage', 251; Gowen, 'Great Britain and the Twenty-One Demands', 82.
[115] TNA, ADM 116/2527: China – protection of British life and property, (1926).

forces, further obscuring the boundaries between officials and criminals.[116] As a result, local British officials and officers were either unwilling or unable to recognise, or perhaps simply unaware, that there was a distinction between pirates and picketers. When preparing for anti-piracy patrols, Royal Navy officers were almost certainly influenced in these attitudes by discussing events with British expatriates living in the region and reading the newspapers they produced.[117] Nicholas Clifford has argued that Shanghailanders saw all displays of anti-British sentiment as threatening, with comparisons drawn to the violence of the Boxer Rebellion.[118] With that mind-set, it is easy to see how the maritime enforcement of the boycotts by Chinese picketers was seen as dangerous and tantamount to piracy, with those views then filtering through to naval officers on the China Station.

Of course, uncompromising attitudes labelling all protestors as pirates was not uniform. Many of the more internationally minded British businesses operating in China, including Jardines and the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation, lobbying the British government for a policy of appeasing the Chinese protestors.[119] This fits in with one of the divides in the International Settlement identified by Bickers, that the more international businesses were not representative of the attitudes of the Shanghai settler community.[120] The degree of tension involved in the discussion of how to approach the boycotts was due to the impact on the businesses and communities involved as British exports to China plummeted. Edmund Fung gives the initial drop as being from £28.9 million in 1924 to £19.7 million in 1925, with Goto-Shibata providing a differently-sourced figure of £12.1 million for 1925 leading to a further drop to just £7.5 million by 1927.[121] While the two figures are not directly comparable, they do provide an indication of the scale of impact the boycott was having.

For the servicemen on board the navy vessels assigned to counter the piracy threat, the discussion as to whether picketers were pirates was perhaps an academic one. They were dealing with fast-moving situations where potentially armed men were boarding ships and their precise motives were difficult to establish in the heat of the moment. Indeed, British

[116] *China Mail*, 4 November 1920, p.4.
[117] Journal of Lieutenant William Andrewes, 1925-1926, IWM, DS/MISC/12.
[118] Clifford, 'A Revolution is not a Tea Party', pp.513-514.
[119] Letter from the British business community in Shanghai to Foreign Office, August 1925, TNA, FO 371/10947.
[120] Bickers, 'Shanghailanders', pp.171-172.
[121] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.50; Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain in Shanghai*, p.54.

servicemen who served in China later recounted the difficulty experienced in simply identifying who Chinese groups were, even when walking around Shanghai's streets. Both ordinary civilians and pirates often wore elements of army or military-style clothing, and could be seen carrying weapons. In return soldiers' uniforms were frequently in poor condition, sometimes supplemented by unofficial garments, and they could be found carrying a wide range of weaponry.[122]

The discussion about picketers did feed into what pro-active steps might be taken and whether force could be used to prevent potential shipping seizures, rather than just respond to them.[123] Against the highly charged backdrop, the Royal Navy had to balance the potential for heavy handedness, which would fuel support for anti-foreign groups and boycotts, with the belief that being a light touch would result in a drop in British prestige. For the naval officers involved, their training and experience in which indecisiveness was seen to risk life and ship, was a poor preparation for the diplomacy this work required. Commander Miles of HMS *Hollyhock*, for instance, was lobbied by Consul Cecil Kirke to take a strong stance to an affront to British prestige in Shantou (Swatow) in 1926 when a Chinese ship ignored demands not to use a pontoon belonging to a British company.[124] Miles argued that any action he could take was legally dubious and could have made the situation worse, but Kirke vigorously protested about Miles' inaction to the Foreign Office and Admiralty. Ultimately the Admiralty supported Miles' caution, but this may have been an exception to the rule. While the Shantou incident was different to those involving piracy and hijacking, it displays some of the conflicting non-military priorities that had to be balanced by the officers making decisions in the field. In contrast, Admiral Sir Edwyn Alexander-Sinclair the Commander-in-Chief of the China Station (1925-26) proposed a direct military attack on Guangzhou in 1925 to break the boycott, which was ultimately rejected by Cabinet because Britain would clearly be seen as the aggressor.[125] Sinclair's suggestion may have been wholly

[122] Interview with Private Ernest Whitney, 1992, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 12499, 23-24 minutes; Interview with Lieutenant Ian Wight, 1982, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 6196, Reel 1, 20 minutes; Interview with Lance Corporal Sidney Johnson, 1983, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 6719, Reel 2, 1-2 minutes.
[123] Assorted correspondence and memoranda regarding protection of British life and property in China, 1926-1927, TNA, ADM 116/2527.
[124] Memoranda from Military Branch discussing legal aspects of Commander Miles' actions at Swatow, October 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2527.
[125] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.63.

unsuitable for the tense situation in China after the May Thirtieth Incident, but it was much more in-line with the aggressive and assertive mind-set expected of a 1920s Royal Navy officer than Miles' pragmatic approach.[126]

The involvement of British service personnel in dealing with strikes, protests, and boycotts was not unique to China in this period. The Navy was deployed to a variety of locations worldwide including Mexico (1924) and Egypt (1926-27), as well as on mainland Britain during the General Strike (1926).[127] What proved so challenging in China, however, was the variety of situations where a small force of one or two gunboats found itself involved in an unplanned flashpoint at a remote location. Those boats were primarily tasked with countering piracy, but then found themselves facing protestors and boycott pickets. By the end of 1925 British gunboats were also involved in direct clashes with Chinese troops, particularly after the May Thirtieth Incident triggered an escalation in anti-British feeling in China. Between July and October 1925 alone, there were at least three incidents involving the exchange of gunfire – at Shamian (Shameen) Island and Jiangmen, both near Guangzhou, and on the Yangtze between Chongqing and Chengdu.[128] A reconciliation between Britain and the Guomindang going into early 1926, temporarily calmed the situation. Nonetheless, the events of 1925 highlighted the weakness of using a handful of gunboats to deal with unconventional threats, where there was no clear enemy to combat. Up until that point, the China Station had not had to, or been allowed to, call upon the significant global resources of the wider Royal Navy to assist with the piracy challenge. Within the following twelve to eighteen months, however, the events in China had a significant impact upon the entire Service.

<u>An exceptional deployment: the 1926 task force</u>

Anthony Clayton's study of the British Empire in the interwar period has to a large extent framed the current understanding of the scale of the Royal Navy's deployment to China in the latter part of the 1920s. Clayton states that for most of the 1920s, the Navy posted a large force to the China Station, which peaked in 1926-27 after the dispatch of a task force

[126] Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East,* p.16.
[127] Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower,* pp.116-227; Moretz, *The Royal Navy and the Capital Ship*, p.158; Porter, *Absent Minded Imperialists,* pp.269-281.
[128] Memoranda by the out-going Rear-Admiral David Anderson – Senior Naval Officer Yangtze, 12 October 1925, TNA, 1/8707/219.

to Shanghai, as the Northern Expedition neared the lower Yangtze.[129] Osterhammel later relied upon that description when arguing that the extent of Britain's military presence in 1920s China highlights a feeling of weakness within the British establishment and that the final surge was a last attempt at using gunboat diplomacy in China.[130] While not entirely inaccurate, the core understanding about the behaviour of the Royal Navy and the size of the force posted to China requires additional context.

Between early 1920 and mid 1926 the number of vessels on the China Station remained almost entirely unchanged, with a squadron of five cruisers, four sloops, twelve submarines, sixteen gunboats, and various support craft.[131] The cruisers and submarines were there largely in a deterrent capacity against a possible threat from Japan, while the sloops and gunboats were used on the Chinese coast and rivers in the anti-piracy work that has already been discussed.[132] The cruisers did also make brief 'flag waving' port calls at the cities of the lower Yangtze, however, while travelling between the naval bases at Weihai and Hong Kong.[133] During that period, the only notable change in deployment came from the attachment of the aircraft carrier HMS *Hermes* in August 1925.[134] This was despite calls from the Foreign Office in 1925 for the Navy to strengthen its anti-piracy gunboats patrols, which were summarily rejected by the Admiralty.[135] The argument used in response - that there were no spare suitable vessels - was a little suspect, given that two gunboats were sat unused at Malta. That line was therefore probably just used as a pretext to avoid incurring the additional cost of re-commissioning gunboats, for what the Admiralty considered to be a non-core assignment. Nonetheless, the China Station was the Royal Navy's third largest global commitment, after the vessels assigned to 'home waters' and the Mediterranean Fleet based at Malta.[136]

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[129] Clayton, *The British Empire as Superpower,* pp.206-209.
[130] Osterhammel, 'China', pp.647-648.
[131] Hansard, 13th April 1927, vol.205, cc.342-3; Navy List, December 1920, (1921), NLS, p.714; Angus Konstam, *Yangtze River Gunboats 1900-49,* (Oxford: Osprey, 2011), Appendix.
[132] Bell, "Our Most Exposed Outpost", pp.61-88.
[133] Ship's log of HMS *Diomede* 1924-1925, TNA, ADM 53/75887; Ship's log of HMS *Diomede* 1923-1924, TNA, ADM 53/75886; Ship's log of HMS *Diomede* 1922-1923, TNA, ADM 53/75885; Ship's log of HMS *Carlisle* 1924-1925, TNA, ADM 53/72682; Ship's log of HMS *Despatch* 1924-1925, TNA, ADM 53/75691; Ship's log of HMS *Hawkins* 1923-1924, TNA, ADM 53/78593; Ship's log of HMS *Durban* 1922-1923, TNA, ADM 53/76428.
[134] Ship's log of HMS *Hermes* 1925-1926, TNA, ADM 53/78829.
[135] Correspondence between the Foreign Office and Admiralty, August 1925, TNA, FO 371/10922.
[136] Technically the vessels based around the UK were split into a number of separate commands, but broadly speaking they all had a similar role – to dominate the waters around the British Isles and Northern Atlantic.

Figure 7: Royal Navy global deployment in November 1920[137]

	Capital ships	Cruisers	Destroyers	Minor warships	Submarines	Total
Home / Atlantic	14	11	78	5	22	130
Mediterranean	7	6	22	7	-	42
China	-	5	-	21	12	38
North America	-	4	-	2	-	6
East Indies	-	3	-	3	-	6
Africa	-	3	-	2	-	5
South America	-	3	-	1	-	4
Other	2	3	-	7	-	12

Note: Only includes those warships in active commission (i.e. not in reserve or at training schools).

The China Station's position as the third largest force had been unchanged since the early 1880s, well before both the First World War and Xinhai Revolution.[138] Indeed, after the disruption caused by wartime requirements, the Admiralty had largely restored its forces in East Asia back to the region's previous complement. The only significant alteration that had occurred to the China Station between 1913 and 1920, excluding the war years themselves, was the replacement of three small pre-war submarines with a dozen newer, larger variants, purpose-built to serve as a deterrent against Japan. Of the surface vessels intended for local defence, a flotilla of Victorian torpedo boat destroyers had been replaced by wartime gunboats, better suited to navigating the rapids on the Middle-Yangtze. Given their broadly similar size and armament, however, that change did not represent a noteworthy shift in the Station's strength.[139] Likewise, the new cruisers were all powerful combat vessels, but few of those qualitative improvements were of much value in peacetime. Indeed, a lay person at the time would have struggled to recognise the difference, beyond more obvious visible changes such as funnel layouts. China's civil wars after the Xinhai Revolution may have caused the Navy some concern, but there was no notable increase in the strength of surface vessels posted to the China Station. The overall focus for the post-war Admiralty was on returning to some form of pre-war normality, to a partial 'Pax Britannica', although one increasingly reliant upon American goodwill.[140]

[137] NLS, Navy List, (December 1920).
[138] NLS, Navy List, (March 1913), p.270; Navy List, (June 1884), p.189; Padfield, *Rule Britannia,* pp.209-222; O'Brien, 'The Titan Refreshed', 149-151.
[139] NLS, Navy List, (March 1913), p.270; NLS, Navy List (May 1920), p.510.
[140] Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, (London: Macmillan, 1983), p.279.

The comparison used between the China Station in 1913 and 1920 also treats two submarine depot ships attached after the war as full warships, based upon the way they were actually employed during peacetime, particularly for anti-piracy and imperial policing work. If those vessels are assessed using their on-paper, supporting-role classification, then the Station's surface warship tonnage was ten percent below its pre-war level in 1920. The latter approach is worth keeping in mind when evaluating the symbolic impact of the fleet, as submarine tenders were less visually imposing for reinforcing imperial prestige than fully armed warships. Both HMS *Titania* and HMS *Ambrose*, posted to the station until 1927-28, were originally designed as cargo ships, only to be hastily converted into depot ships in 1914.[141] They were functional vessels with only their white ensigns advertising that they were Royal Navy vessels and not merchant ships.

Taken over an even longer timeframe, looking back to the Boxer Rebellion, there was still a strong degree of continuity. The China Station remained largely unchanged throughout the ten years prior to 1913, after the armada sent in response to the Boxer Rebellion had been recalled. Newer warships had replaced most of the original contingent from 1903, with a reduction in boiler room personnel and an increase in fighting attributes. HMS *Hawkins* as the flagship in 1920, for example, was faster and better equipped to respond quickly to crises around the command than its predecessors *Minotaur* and *King Alfred*. The greater use of machinery, however, meant that *Hawkins* had fewer crewmen available to put ashore when assisting in the policing of Britain's imperial outposts. *King Alfred* had a crew of roughly 900 servicemen in 1910 and *Minotaur* 825 in 1914, whereas *Hawkins* set off for the China Station in 1919 with 732.[142] That was particularly important when managing large protests or riots in Shanghai, or other Treaty Ports, because manpower was far more valuable than having slightly larger calibre main guns.

Measuring the level of manpower precisely is a challenge, as replacement ships arriving on the Station were often short-handed and it could take months for them to reach full complement.[143] As a result, submarines and gunboats were occasionally left on skeleton crews in harbour when undergoing repairs, with their sailors used to supplement those on

[141] *Jane's Fighting Ships of World War I*, Reproduction, (London, 2001), p.90.
[142] Ship's log of HMS *Hawkins,* 1919-1920, TNA, ADM 53/43950; Ship's log of HMS *Minotaur,* 1914-1915, TNA, ADM 53/49545; *Jane's Fighting Ships of World War I*, p.33.
[143] Diary of Cedric Holland, September 1928.

other warships.[144] Nonetheless, after taking this into account the background number of service personnel permanently posted to East Asia remained relatively steady after the mid-1890s, at between 4,250 and 4,750 men, excluding the war years, until the end of the 1930s.[145] On balance therefore, Britain maintained a remarkably similar peacetime naval presence off the Chinese coast in late 1925 to the one present in 1903. This is particularly significant given the major changes in the Royal Navy's pattern of global deployment in the intervening years. Combined with the complete withdrawal of the neighbouring Pacific Fleet in 1912, the Royal Navy's effective presence in early 1920s East Asia was actually relatively modest compared with pre-war standards.[146]

The task force mentioned by Clayton and Osterhammel is therefore of far greater significance than is suggested by their accounts, as it marks an exceptional escalation in the deployment of naval force to China. At its peak in April 1927, Vice Admiral Reginald Tyrwhitt had at his disposal thirteen cruisers, two aircraft carriers, twenty destroyers, four sloops, seventeen gunboats, and twelve submarines, in addition to a large collection of support vessels and hired armed merchantmen.[147] The majority of the additional vessels were dispatched in the short period between September 1926 and February 1927, as the Guomindang's Northern Expedition neared the lower Yangtze.[148] In addition, a battalion of 1,000 Royal Marines was formed and despatched from the UK in January, and placed under Tyrwhitt's command upon its arrival at Shanghai. In total, the augmented force had roughly 8,000 extra personnel and a total displacement of roughly 200,000 tons. As an indicator of what that actually meant in practice, that was over two and a half times its normal level and greater than most nations' entire navies at the time, including those of the Soviet Union, Spain, and the Netherlands.[149] The strengthened Royal Navy force in East Asia was over twice the strength of Japan's First Expeditionary Fleet and three-times the US Navy's Asiatic Fleet, even after they had also been reinforced, but over a significantly larger area.[150] Along

[144] Barraclough, *I was sailing*, p.58.
[145] Copies of the Navy list, NMM.
[146] Lambert, 'Admiral Sir Francis Bridgeman-Bridgeman', p.68; Padfield, *Rule Britannia,* pp.209-222.
[147] Hansard, 13th April 1927, vol.205, cc.342-3. Vice Admiral Reginald Tyrwhitt, Commander in Chief of the China Station between 1926 and 1929.
[148] Hansard, 1st December 1926, vol.200, cc.1168-71; Hansard, 24th February 1927, vol.202, cc.1943-4.
[149] Chesneau, *All the World's Fighting Ships*.
[150] Hansard, 13th April 1927, vol.205, cc.342-3; *Annual Reports of the Navy Department*, 15 November 1927, University of Michigan (via Hathi Trust Digital Library, last accessed 8 January 2018), p.6.

with the naval force, the British Army assembled a Shanghai Defence Force, which peaked at 17,000 men with a further 2-3,000 in Hong Kong. Likewise, the RAF made its first deployment of shore-based combat units to Asia, consisting of at least thirty combat aircraft split between Shanghai and Hong Kong. [151]

Taken in a global perspective the task force was a major deployment of the Royal Navy's resources at that point in time, involving roughly one-third of the Navy's cruisers in active service and over one-quarter of its fully crewed destroyers.[152] This was in addition to the China Station's normal contingent of roughly half of the Royal Navy's total sloops and gunboats in active service. As a result of what was happening in East Asia, the remaining smaller warships around the world were also forced to abandon their existing duties, with seventeen sloops covering for missing cruisers around the Mediterranean and East Indies.[153] Of the eighteen cruisers not sent to China, three were being used for 'instructional purposes' leading destroyer flotillas, four were under-going repairs, and two were obsolete pre-war variants.[154] Events in China were pushing the Navy to the limit, and left the Admiralty with minimal spare capacity in active service to react to any further adverse developments.

Nicholas Clifford has previously highlighted the scale of the British Army deployment during these events, since it was larger than the 18,000 men sent to deal with the Boxer Rebellion.[155] The scale of the overall force, however, was even more significant than his account suggests. The Admiralty had not deployed such a large portion of its total fleet to the east of the Suez Canal since the Boxer Rebellion.[156] As a result, Lieutenant Commander Joseph Kenworthy MP questioned the First Lord of the Admiralty, William Bridgeman, in the House of Commons about whether it would be advisable to bring some vessels out of

[151] Telegram from the Admiralty to Vice Admiral Tyrwhitt, 26 January 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8711/144; Keith Stevens, ''Duncan Force' - the Shanghai Defence Force in 1927, & the Career of Captain Ronald Spear', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 48 (2008), 157.
[152] Hansard, 2nd March 1927, vol.203, cc.358-9; Correspondence between Admiralty and Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding Navy Estimate, 1928, TNA, ADM 1/8724/68.
[153] Admiralty correspondence with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1928, TNA, ADM 1/8724/68.
[154] Journal of Midshipman L.C.S. Sheppard, 30 April 1927, National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN), 1991/101/67; Navy List, April 1927, NMRN.
[155] Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire*, p.188.
[156] Navy List, 1901/2, NMM; Kathleen Harland, *The Royal Navy in Hong Kong,* (Hong Kong: Royal Navy, 1985), p.169.

reserve to strengthen those stations weakened by the commitment to China.[157] Kenworthy was a curious character who has been described as ‘a man who was neither easy to work with nor necessarily very competent’ in his naval career and 'a solitary figure with a penchant for tilting at naval windmills' as a politician. [158] Nonetheless, in this case he aired a valid concern about the strain the Navy was being put under by events in China. A partial mobilisation of Britain’s naval reserves would have been an exceptional step in peacetime, particularly when not related to a threat posed by a major world power. Indeed, mobilising the Royal Navy’s reserves was not publically discussed when Britain was on the verge of war with Turkey during the Chanak Crisis, although the Mediterranean Fleet normally had greater resources at its disposal.[159] Far from Chanak having produced a ‘reaction against an active foreign policy in general’, as argued by Kenneth Morgan, it had only changed the way the British government publically referred to its actions.[160] In this spirit, Bridgeman’s response to Kenworthy’s enquiry was, unsurprisingly, an unequivocal statement that the major deployment to China was purely temporary.

Bridgeman’s emphasis on the temporary nature of the strain upon the Navy was borne out by events. In August 1927, instructions were sent to China for preparations to be made for the gradual withdrawal of British forces, although none that would impede the defence of Shanghai.[161] That came only three months after the full Shanghai Defence Force had arrived at the city.[162] By November 1927 the China Station was back down to its normal complement of cruisers and one of the two aircraft carriers had returned to Britain for a refit. Half of the destroyers then followed shortly afterwards, departing East Asia in May 1928.[163] Similarly, the Shanghai Defence Force had halved by June 1928, with ten of the fourteen additional battalions present in mid-1927 withdrawn by January 1929.[164] The period between late 1926 and mid 1927 therefore represents a clear, significant, and sudden escalation in the commitment of force to China, even if it was only a temporary one.

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[157] Hansard, 2nd March 1927, vol.203, cc.358-9.
[158] Black, *The British Naval Staff*, p.34; Moretz, *Thinking Wisely, Planning Boldly*, p.94.
[159] Cabinet discussions about the Chanak Crisis, 23 September 1922, TNA, CAB 23/31/3.
[160] Kenneth O. Morgan, ‘England, Britain and the Audit of War: The Prothero Lecture’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 7 (1997), 139.
[161] War Office to General Officer Commanding North China, 26 August 1927, TNA, WO 106/86.
[162] Chronology of Shaforce deployment, 30 April 1930, TNA, WO 106/83.
[163] Hansard, 16 November 1927, vol.210, cc.1007-8; Hansard, 12 March 1930, vol.236, cc.1299-300; K.R. Buckley, ‘The Third Destroyer Flotilla in China 1926-1928’, *The Naval Review* 18/1 (1930), pp.97-116.
[164] Hansard, 27 June 1928, vol.219, cc.508-9; Hansard, 4 February 1929, vol.224, c.1414.

Had the deployment lasted longer, then further questions would almost certainly have been asked about whether the Royal Navy needed, at the very least, to mobilise sufficient reserves in order to bring its seven cruisers on reduced crews into active service.[165]

That sudden increase in the size of the British military force available in and around China resulted from a relatively rapid change in environment during the preceding eighteen months. After the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925 and over the course of 1926, there was a shift from unconventional threats, in the form of piracy, banditry, strikes and boycotts, to direct threats against Britain's core areas of interest in China, the treaty ports. In part, this resulted from the rising level of unrest and anti-British sentiment in cities along the Yangtze and particularly around Shanghai in late 1926 going into 1927. Existing tension in the city due to the Shanghai Municipal Police's heavy-handed policing of the city's Chinese residents, combined with poor rice harvests, built a background of growing tension. The situation in Shanghai then reached a full crisis point in early 1927 as the National Revolutionary Army of the Guomindang's Northern Expedition approached.[166] While the British Empire was not directly involved in China's civil wars, the conflict nonetheless triggered the deployment of sufficient force to be able to dissuade armed groups from attacking foreign, and particularly British, persons and property in key cities, such as the treaty ports.

Prior to 1926, when conflict between warlords had neared areas of British concern, it had been on a scale modest enough for existing resources based at Hong Kong to deal with. Changes in the warlord controlling Beijing and the area around it, for example, had led to one of Britain's four army battalions permanently based in East Asia prior to 1927 being stationed at Tianjin.[167] Deploying those 800 troops was largely symbolic, although it did unlock new options for the orderly evacuation or temporary defence of Britain's diplomatic outpost in Beijing. Likewise within forty-eight hours of the May Thirtieth Incident, the cruisers *Diomede, Despatch,* and *Carlisle* were all ordered to steam at high speed from Weihai to Shanghai as a temporary reinforcement for the Yangtze gunboats.[168] Over 1,000

[165] Hansard, 2 March 1927, vol.203, cc.358-9.
[166] Van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China*, pp.109-119.
[167] Minutes from a meeting of the Committee for Imperial Defence, 8 November 1928, TNA, CAB 24/198.
[168] Ship's log of HMS *Diomede* 1924-1925, TNA, ADM 53/75887; Ship's log of HMS *Carlisle* 1924-1925, TNA, ADM 53/72682.

additional sailors and marines did have practical value, but again the presence of three 'steel castles' was seen as a powerful statement in itself. Both situations were felt to be too great for the ordinary patrols of smaller vessels to manage, but they did not require requests for additional resources from elsewhere in the Empire.

The Royal Navy was aided in its defence of the largest treaty ports during times of crisis by civilian defence groups, such as the Shanghai Volunteer Corps (SVC), which was first formed in 1854.[169] Those units came under the nominal authority of the ports they were tasked with protecting and whose international residents volunteered for service. In practice, however, they were controlled to a large extent by the British government. Provided with weapons and leadership by the British Army, the eight main volunteer forces in Chinese cities added up to over 1,700 men in 1925, although the SVC accounted for the overwhelming majority.[170] Likewise, roughly two-thirds of the volunteers were British or from the British Empire, but the SVC also had two dedicated American companies, one Portuguese, one Japanese, one Chinese, and a small Italian unit.[171] Those militias had been formed with the intention of providing 'military protection on the cheap', to handle minor disturbances until the arrival of regular forces.[172] In doing so, the volunteers generally operated within the boundaries of the treaty ports or the Shanghai International Settlement, but they were occasionally sent inland to guard nearby factories or power stations.[173] Foreign civilians living in more remote locations, beyond the reach of those forces, were increasingly advised to move for their own safety, particularly after the May Thirtieth Incident.[174] The ongoing civil war in China continued in close proximity to the international settlements, but foreign forces remained largely side-line observers.

<u>The Shanghai task force and Britain's global struggle against communism</u>

The situation changed in 1926 as the civil unrest and disorder in the treaty ports combined with peasant uprisings around the Yangtze basin, along with the approaching Northern

[169] Jackson, 'Expansion and defence' pp.189-201; Bickers, *Scramble for China,* p.127.
[170] Appendix to a report on the situation in China for Committee of Imperial Defence, 30 June 1925, TNA, CAB 24/174/26.
[171] Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1926, SMA, U1-1-939.
[172] Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism 1900-1949*, (Manchester: MUP, 1999), p.14.
[173] Letter from Frank Turner to his mother, 10 May 1922, Brotherton Library, LIDDLE/WW1/CH/04.
[174] Letter from Palairet to multiple recipients regarding rights of British civilians in China, 29 July 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8707/219.

Expedition. These factors were felt to be all the more critical because of the wave of anti-British rhetoric that the British believed was being propagated by China's communists and Soviet provocateurs, which surged after the May Thirtieth Incident.[175] Such views were particularly pronounced among the British expatriate communities in China, but applied across wide swathes of the British establishment.[176] Increasingly militant workers, demanding better deals from their foreign employers, fitted into that broader picture of a communist threat.[177] While the general population in the Yangtze basin were supportive of what they understood communism to mean, the larger uprisings that occurred were generally connected to specific issues and not driven by ideology or thoughts of revolution.[178] Nonetheless, it was the British establishment's fear of a spreading communist threat, whether imagined or real, that influenced their decisions at key moments.

What the British perceived as communist inspired civil threats to their interests in China combined with the fear of direct military action by the Guomindang's armies. Prior to the breakdown between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party in late 1926 through into 1927 the Northern Expedition was still partly led by the communists.[179] While ultimately relatively short-lived, a Soviet brokered deal in 1923 had resulted in a United Front being formed between the Guomindang and the Communist Party of China, with the two nominally working together as a single force in the following years. Indeed, many of the National Revolutionary armies leading the Northern Expedition were armed with weaponry either gifted or sold by the Soviet Union.[180] As a result, Britain felt that the Guomindang was 'dominated by extremists working under Soviet influence'.[181]

As the Northern Expedition approached the Yangtze's major trading hubs, particularly Hankou and Nanjing, concern grew about what would happen when the fighting reached those cities and whether anti-British rhetoric would become more than just words. After the British had been forced to evacuate and abandon their concessions on the middle and upper

[175] Anne L. Foster, 'Secret Police Cooperation and the Roots of Anti-Communism in Interwar Southeast Asia', *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 4/4 (1995), 334-335.
[176] Osterhammel, 'China', p.651.
[177] Murdoch, 'Exploiting Anti-Imperialism', 65-95; Van de Ven, *War and Nationalism,* pp.113-117.
[178] Chang Liu, 'Making Revolution in Jiangnan: Communists and the Yangzi Delta Countryside, 1927-1945', *Modern China* 29/1 (2003), 6-7.
[179] Clarence M. Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution in China: 1923-1928*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1984), pp.100-144.
[180] Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare*, pp.167-168; Wilbur, *Nationalist Revolution in China,* pp.40-44;
[181] Edmund S.K. Fung, 'The Sino-British Rapprochement, 1927-1931' *Modern Asian Studies* 17/1 (1983), 81.

Yangtze, concern turned to panic as Guomindang forces neared Shanghai and its International Settlement. The Shanghai Municipal Police and Shanghai Volunteer Corps, and similar smaller civilian groups in other treaty ports, had provided an effective-enough defence for the foreign concessions when nearby fighting was between different warlords, such as during the 1924 Jiangsu-Zhejiang war.[182] That fighting was not directed against foreign interests, and so the main risks came from potential collateral damage and lawlessness related to groups of disaffected defeated soldiers. In contrast, the threat posed by the National Revolutionary Army marching against those concessions, potentially linking up with agitators within the city, meant that the Royal Navy would have to be Britain's primary deterrent.[183]

A shift in the Royal Navy's strategy for the Yangtze region, which will be explored in greater detail later in this thesis, did play a role in the decision to send the vast task force in 1927. In particular, the catastrophic failure of the Wanxian expedition in September 1926 brought about a series of events that led to a rapid re-assessment of Britain's approach to inland treaty ports. The scale of the Navy's response to the threat, however, was driven in part by the wider context of the communist influence in China fitting into part of what was seen as a global plot instigated by Soviet Russia against the British Empire. During a discussion of imperial defence issues in *The Naval Review,* for example, the clashes that had been seen in China were clearly linked into this wider battle against communism. Indeed, it was considered to be 'common knowledge that Russia is the instigator of the hostile attitude of China towards the powers, especially the British Empire'.[184]

The British government's concern about communist involvement in the events in China in 1926-27 originated from the turmoil and bloodshed it had witnessed during the Soviet Revolution. At the height of its conventional power in the 1920s, having outlasted its main rivals in the First World War, the British Empire was comparatively relaxed about the threat of a major-power conflict. Brian Bond argues in his discussion of the ten-year rule, for example, that the British government genuinely believed, in the first half of the 1920s, that Britain would not be involved in a major war during the ten years after its first signing in

[182] Jackson, 'Expansion and defence', pp.189-191.
[183] Stevens, "Duncan Force", p.159.
[184] Anonymous, 'Imperial Defence', *The Naval Review* 14/1 (1926), p.95.

1919.[185] The emergence of an ideology that could cause uprisings in its colonies and threatened to cause unrest at home therefore represented the most significant threat to the stability of the British Empire. In the eyes of its officials, communist-inspired uprisings heralded not only the prospect of weakened British power, but also widespread death and destruction.

Communism was felt to be such a significant threat by Britain and the other remaining European colonial powers as to warrant the unprecedented regular exchange of information on potential communist agitators in Asia.[186] As a result, China came to be seen as the front line in a war against Soviet influence. That belief was based upon some hard evidence, and plenty of questionable reports, that Soviet agents were promoting an anti-imperial line in China, in an attempt to push out the western powers from their lucrative and strategically valuable international settlements.[187] Such sentiment appears to have increased over the early 1920s. Strikes by Chinese workers in Shanghai 1921-22, for example, were primarily blamed upon economic conditions, particularly the rising cost of rice.[188] By the following year, however, Captain Superintendent McEuen of the Shanghai Municipal Police was retrospectively blaming 'Bolshevik Propaganda' as having been solely responsible for stirring up trouble.[189] Indeed, by 1925 Admiral of the Fleet David Beatty proposed in a note to Cabinet Secretary Maurice Hankey that 'the present state of affairs in China is the result of Bolshevist exploitation of … anti-foreign feeling.'[190]

Events in China therefore added to the unrest in India, which the British establishment believed was being orchestrated by Soviet agents, and the loss of British influence over Persia, also as a result of moves by Russia. Officials in Whitehall wholly believed there to be an active, global Soviet plot to change the balance of world power. For some of Britain's political elite there was a genuine fear that the Soviet Union was targeting the British Empire from 'Dublin to Peking', in an effort to undermine it. [191] The Under-Secretary of State

[185] Bond, *British military policy*, pp.38-97.
[186] Foster, 'Secret Police Cooperation', 335.
[187] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.9.
[188] Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1921, SMA, U1-1-934; Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1922, SMA, U1-1-935.
[189] Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1923, SMA, U1-1-936.
[190] Memorandum sent from Admiral Beatty to Maurice Hankey, July 1925, NMM, BTY 8/8.
[191] Minutes of Cabinet meeting discussing the effect of Soviet activity on British trade, 25 February 1926, TNA, CAB 2/4/210.

for Foreign Affairs Ronald McNeill went so far as to state to the House of Commons in 1925 that he believed Russia was 'doing their worst, or their best, to injure us so far as they can'.[192]

The timing of the events on the Yangtze was also particularly significant, given that it mirrored the growing hostility between Britain and the Soviet Union, which culminated in the Arcos Affair in May 1927.[193] The police raid on Arcos' offices in Moorgate, based upon information that the premises contained stolen War Office files, ultimately led to a temporary severance of diplomatic relations between Great Britain and the Soviet Union.[194] The period between 1927 and 1929 was seen as a low point in Anglo-Soviet relations, producing heightened feelings among the British political class.[195] Against the backdrop of those Anglo-Soviet clashes, the events in China were not just a concern for Great Britain in their impact upon trade, but as a part of a global ideological battle against communism. The effectiveness of Britain's response to events in Shanghai and along the Yangtze, was therefore felt to have a much wider potential impact, upon the security of the British Empire as a whole. Sending such a large task force to China did not just send a statement to the Guomindang leadership about how serious Britain was in defending Shanghai. It was also a crude display of British imperial muscle in front of the global press as part of that wider propaganda war against the Soviet Union.

While the Guomindang's decision to purge its communist members in mid-1927 started to allay Britain's fears that it was part of a wider Soviet plot, the Guomindang still officially maintained an anti-imperial stance.[196] Even without the communists, Britain was not particularly keen about the Guomindang, but recognised that they were more aligned with western values and so regarded them as the lesser of two evils.[197] A memorandum from one Foreign Office official in China, Mr Porter, to Whitehall in January 1928 stated that he saw the nationalist groups as being more co-operative and friendlier to deal with than other

[192] Debate in the House of Commons on China and Russia, 7 August 1925, TNA, FO 371/10957.
[193] Arcos: All Russian Co-Operative Society, part of the Russian trade delegation. Minutes of Cabinet meeting discussing the effect of Soviet activity on British trade, 25 February 1926, TNA, CAB 2/4/210; Sabahi, *British Policy in Persia*, p.63.
[194] Memoranda by MI5 on Soviet Intelligence Organisation, 1922-1929, TNA, KV 3/17; West, *MASK*, p.11.
[195] William Edwards, *British Foreign Policy 1815-1933*, (London: Methuen, 1934), pp.195-196.
[196] Osterhammel, 'China', pp.651-652; Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution in China*, pp.100-144.
[197] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, p.9; Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution in China*, pp.100-144.

options in China, even if they were not ideal allies.[198] Likewise for the Guomindang, the shift to a friendlier attitude towards foreign powers in 1926-27, was the result of the pragmatic reasoning that they needed some level of support from the great powers to secure arms deals and financing. Sherman Lai argues that the disappearance of the derogatory term 'ying fan' from Chiang Kai-shek's diary in September 1926, in reference to the British, marks the point where he switched to seeing Britain as potentially useful rather than as an enemy.[199] Such a subtle change would have been invisible to the wider world, but more tangible developments followed. The schism between nationalists and communists in 1927 was the most significant of those, removing the key barrier to the Guomindang and British being able to soften their rhetoric and shift towards a mutually beneficial relationship. Once that had occurred, and the immediate battle against communism was seen as having been won, the Royal Navy could start withdrawing warships from their temporary attachment to the China Station.

This does not mean that the British government were entirely comfortable about the Guomindang, even without their prior communist links. As previously detailed, much of the 1927 task force did disperse around the Empire by mid-1928, but the China Station retained part of its enhanced strength on a permanent basis. A full destroyer flotilla and two additional gunboats remained in East Asia until the new global conflict in 1939, strengthening the Navy's capabilities in defending Britain's interests in China.[200] The scale of the task force, and the enhanced China Station did come at a cost, one that had a bearing on the long-term viability of the Empire.

The Royal Navy's previous strategy for China had generally been formed around the use of force to provide a short, sharp, and invariably violent response, such as in the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion.[201] That emphasis on avoiding long-term sustained commitments of force became all the more important in the years leading up to the First World War, but particularly after it. Britain's politicians felt that cost of policing the empire was increasingly unsustainable, amid the apparent Soviet attempts to stir up hostility among the colonial

[198] Memorandum from Porter to Foreign Office regarding situation in China, January 1928, TNA, FO 228/3882.
[199] Sherman X. Lai, 'Nationalistic enthusiasm versus imperialist sophistication: Britain from Chiang Kai-shek's perspective', in *Britain and China, 1840-1970: Empire, finance and war*, ed. by Robert Bickers and Jonathan J. Howlett (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 206.
[200] Hansard, 12 March 1930, vol.236, cc.1299-300.
[201] Bickers, *The Scramble for China*, pp.346-352.

populations. Given the huge financial cost of the Great War, and Britain's acquisition of mandates over large tracts of the Middle East, there was a growing reluctance to be drawn into further expensive military commitments.[202]

Convoying measures brought in by the Navy on the Yangtze, to counter the piracy threat, were alone sufficient to raise questions about whether the cost was worth the results. By May 1928, for example, Rear-Admiral Tweedie noted that the additional fuel consumed convoying British merchant vessels on the Middle-Yangtze alone had reached £12,000 per annum.[203] That growing background burden was nothing compared to the costs incurred, and potentially required, as a result of the 1926 task force. To bring a single cruiser out of reserve to replace one of the eight sent to China, for example, would have cost the navy roughly £100,000 per annum just to pay the crew's wages, even before all the additional expenses associated with active service.[204] To put that figure in context, Hong Kong contributed £250,000 per year towards the Royal Navy's commitment to the China Station, only a fraction of the outlay of maintaining the existing squadron in the mid-1920s.[205] As a result, the economic burden of maintaining the enlarged force, if Britain and therefore the Royal Navy were drawn fully into conflict with China, would soon outweigh the value of a peripheral area of informal empire. Not only that, but with Treasury restrictions on the naval budget, the Admiralty were aware that the burden of a sustained large commitment to China would require either the cancellation of new vessels or a significant increase in Hong Kong's financial contributions. It was not only the economic burden of military action, however, that played upon the minds of the Admiralty and British government, when deciding upon how to handle the 1926 crisis in China. For politicians in particular, they had to consider domestic public opinion and changes in attitudes towards the use of military force, and the protection of civilian lives, trends with origins back beyond the First World War.[206]

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[202] Bell, *The Royal Navy,* pp.14-15; O'Brien, 'The Titan Refreshed', 149; Porter, *Absent Minded Imperialists,* pp.267-281.
[203] Rear-Admiral Tweedie to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 28 May 1928, TNA, ADM 116/2624.
[204] Navy Estimates 1925-1926 and assorted Cabinet notes, (1925), TNA, CAB 116/2300.
[205] Navy Estimates 1925-1926 and assorted Cabinet notes, (1925), TNA, CAB 116/2300.
[206] Alexander S. Kanya-Forstner, 'The War, Imperialism, and Decolonization', in *The Great War and the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Jay Winter, Geoffrey Parker and Mary R. Habeck (New Haven, Connecticut: YUP, 2000), p.246; William C. Kirby, 'The Internationalization of China: Foreign Relations at Home and Abroad in the Republican Era', *China Quarterly* 150 (1997), 442; Kier, *Imagining War*, p.109.

The Royal Navy's changing role in protecting British civilians

It is worth emphasising at this point that the British government's response to the 1926 crisis was not made solely in order to intervene militarily on behalf of Britain's foreign or economic policy in the region. One of the Royal Navy's primary roles in its deployments to Chinese cities in the latter 1920s was the safe evacuation of civilians during moments of crisis, both from the British Empire and those belonging to other nations. Over the course of February 1929, for example, HMS *Magnolia* was stationed off Yantai (Chefoo) at the start of the month only then to shuttle to Weihai and back twice, in response to the situation escalating and then calming in different locations around Shandong Province.[207] The log books from the earlier part of the decade, in contrast, show that even over the course of a number of years it was rare for those sloops to make so many visits to cities other than Shanghai and Hong Kong.[208] While *Magnolia* was shuttling between Weihai and Yantai, HMS *Foxglove* was also stationed at Yantai, in the belief that its guns and men would offer suitable short-term protection to the 495 international civilians while preparations were made for a potential evacuation.[209]

Such tasks were a relatively new role for the Royal Navy in China, which came about from two changes in circumstances. The first of those factors has already been discussed widely by historians of Britain's relationship with China in the early twentieth century. Prior to 1911, if a British civilian was not on official business in China, such as embassy staff, the British armed forces were unlikely to offer much protection outside of key locations. The safety of British civilians and officials was dependent upon the Foreign Office's encouraging the Qing authorities to protect foreigners, often through the threat or use of violent reprisals.[210] The murder of two British missionaries and their Chinese maid in 1902, for example, led to the Qing authorities arresting 300 people, executing ten and more dying in jail, after coming under pressure from the Foreign Office.[211] State-level intimidation, coercion, and on-the-spot policing, using the background threat of violent reprisals by the Royal Navy, were central to how British gunboat diplomacy offered a degree of protection

[207] Memoranda by Admiral Tweedie regarding military situation in China, February 1929, TNA, FO 228/2929.
[208] E.g. Ship's log of HMS *Magnolia* 1924-1925, TNA, ADM 53/80209.
[209] The figure does not include Japanese civilians who were treated differently, given the added dimension in Yantai of Japan's armed forces being involved in the hostilities.
[210] Osterhammel, 'China', p.648.
[211] Peter Zarrow, *China in War and Revolution 1895-1949,* (London: Routledge, 2005), p.159.

to those of its civilians who ventured beyond the boundaries of the Empire.[212] With the collapse of the Qing Empire and subsequent breakdown in central control in China after the Xinhai revolution there was no government to be held responsible for the protection of British civilians, and so that strategy was no longer possible. As a result, while the stated priorities for the armed forces still emphasised the protection of property at Shanghai and other major trading ports, there was also a growing emphasis on pro-actively protecting civilians.

The switch to a pro-active approach was not simply due to the new inability to reactively threaten a Chinese government that was capable of extending effective protection over foreign civilians. A second factor was at play, with the British government feeling increasingly duty bound to prevent the death or serious injury of its subjects. General responsibility for safety outside the Empire remained with the individual, as illustrated by the Foreign Office instructions from early 1927 that all British civilians living upriver of Hankou should move immediately, as the Royal Navy was no longer going to maintain an active presence on the Upper Yangtze.[213] The growing number of cases during the 1920s where civilians were evacuated from treaty ports ahead of potential trouble, however, indicates the steady and subtle underlying shift.

The growing number of foreigners living in China with their families, rather than as small groups of merchants and missionaries, was almost certainly a significant factor in that process. The presence of women and children, who were seen as vulnerable and defenceless, catalysed the process leading towards the British government protecting its own expatriates.[214] This was not unique to events in China. Harford Montgomery-Hyde describes how in 1922, the RAF made the world's first ever airlift evacuation of civilians from Sulaimaniya in Mesopotamia, in the face of growing unrest among the local population.[215] Merchant steamships were generally employed to conduct the practical process of transporting such groups in China, but the overall process was managed by the Royal Navy. In the immediate aftermath of the May Thirtieth and Shamian Island incidents

[212] Robert Bickers, 'Ordering Shanghai: Policing a treaty port, 1854-1900', in *Maritime Empires: British Imperial Maritime Trade in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by David Killingray, Margarette Lincoln, and Nigel Rigby (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004), pp.174-194.
[213] Draft report by the Chiefs of Staff on 'The Situation in China', 29 March 1927, TNA, CAB 24/186/9.
[214] Reports by Acting-Consul Archer, July 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8707/219.
[215] Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy Between the Wars,* p.121.

in 1925, for example, the Navy employed a P&O Steamship to move sixty women and children from Guangzhou to Hong Kong.[216]

The task of potentially evacuating civilians from smaller coastal locations, as seen with *Magnolia* and *Foxglove* in northern China, was also not the only way in which the new official attitude towards the protection of civilians was evident. For those occasions when events took a dangerous turn, and might result in the use of force, the British establishment had put in place a series of rules of engagement. In the orders for 'C' company 12th Royal Marine Battalion, for example, upon their deployment to the Nanjing International Settlement in August 1927, clear emphasis was placed on negotiating an agreement for the resumption of trade first. If that was not possible then the protection of property followed, but if all else failed then the protection of 'the lives of international persons'.[217] Throughout these orders there was a recurrent emphasis upon trying to avoid enflaming the situation by exercising restraint and avoiding casualties, for both local and foreign civilians. This is highlighted by the paragraph outlining the rules of engagement:

> The use of firearms is justifiable and may be resorted to when it appears that loss of life or serious damage to property or to protect the troops should they be in danger of being overwhelmed. No more than the minimum amount of fire required to achieve this object is permissible nor can it be justified.[218]

An explicit warning for the officers followed: they would be held personally accountable for any excessive violence committed by their men. The motivation behind the order was the desire to avoid escalating the situation through reports of British servicemen shooting unarmed civilians, rather than newfound unease with using violence against Chinese protestors. A later paragraph detailed, for example, that the use of rifle butts and bayonets was perfectly acceptable in dealing with groups of Chinese rioters, but only if they were felt to pose a risk. Over the preceding eighteen months the Royal Navy had been involved in a series of violent incidents where British servicemen had been involved in the deaths of Chinese civilians. Those in Whitehall were therefore worried about further tarnishing

[216] E.g. Journal of Lieutenant William Andrewes, 3 July 1925, IWM, DS/MISC/12.
[217] War Diaries of 12th RMB on service in China, 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8709/102.
[218] War Diaries of 12th RMB on service in China, 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8709/102. The second sentence was underlined in the original document during typing, for emphasis on the desired level of restraint.

Britain's reputation, which might fuel further anti-British protests and violence, both in China and across the region.

In the previous year, London had given clear guidance to the China Station that the Royal Navy would be given relatively free reign while operating around the coast and waterways of China. However, it stipulated that British personnel should avoid setting foot on Chinese soil where possible.[219] That qualification came from a disagreement between Hong Kong Governor Clementi and London over the limited application of military force in China. In July 1926, for example, Clementi and his local military chiefs made the decision to send a company of troops from the East Surrey regiment, a naval aircraft, and thirty policemen into Chinese territory to secure the release of Hong Kong police motorboat No.10 and its crew.[220] Cantonese boycott picketers had seized the motorboat after it grounded on the Chinese shore on the night of the 20 July due to storms and flooding. Ultimately the incident passed peacefully when Mr Wood, a teacher taken on the expedition as a translator, persuaded the picketers to release the policemen, their boat, and their weapons. Nonetheless, sending troops ashore had risked a significant escalation, with the very real possibility it could have ended in bloodshed.

As a result of the incident, an order was issued by the Admiralty to the China Station on 26 September that no British military personnel or aircraft were to be sent into or over Chinese territory without express permission from London.[221] Austen Chamberlain and Leo Amery stated that they were sympathetic to Clementi's arguments and were willing to provide the caveat giving the Royal Navy freedom of operation when afloat on Chinese waterways. However, neither of them wanted to further inflame the situation given the protests and boycott that had developed in the aftermath of the May Thirtieth Incident. The subsequent flurry of correspondence between London and the British officials in China over the 26 September order did not change Whitehall's new, more pragmatic stance towards China, which was announced in greater detail shortly afterwards with the December Memorandum.[222] The main purpose of that memorandum was to shift Britain's relationship

[219] Cabinet discussion about piracy in Bias Bay, 25 November 1926, TNA CAB 2/4/218.
[220] Memoranda from Clementi to Foreign Office regarding the protection of British life and property, July 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2527.
[221] Orders from War Office to General Officer Commanding Hong Kong, 27 September 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2527.
[222] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, p.101.

with China and negotiate some moderate concessions, but it also involved clarification about how the British government felt the Royal Navy should approach events in China.[223]

It would be tempting to assume that the August 1927 orders included greater emphasis upon avoiding casualties due to the violence involving British forces over the previous year. During earlier clashes in 1924 and 1925, however, there was a similar emphasis within the armed forces upon minimising any potential violent encounters. In July 1925, for example, Lieutenant Anthony Pugsley from HMS *Widgeon* led a shore party of four naval ratings in a bayonet charge to disperse a crowd of protestors outside the international area of Chongqing. As a result of that action, a Chinese civilian was stabbed in the stomach.[224] While Pugsley ensured the civilian was treated by the ship's medical officer and later released to a local hospital, and no-one died as a result of the incident, Pugsley's name was notably absent from the official dispatches made to the Admiralty. This is despite a number of letters sent on behalf of British merchants from Chongqing praising his actions. From the various memoranda in the Admiralty file, it appears that it was felt within the Navy that Pugsley should have shown greater restraint in using force. The protestors were clearly angry, but they had only thrown stones at the British servicemen and so did not present a clear threat to property or life.[225] Indeed, Pugsley later made no mention of the incident in his auto-biography, despite going into detail about numerous other, sometimes trivial, developments during his first year on the Upper Yangtze.[226]

What made the new orders issued in late 1926 different to those that had gone before was the effort made to clarify the precise details of the rules of engagement.[227] A spate of Royal Navy bombardments in 1926 against targets large and small, building up to the one at Wanxian in September, contributed to renewed anti-British outbursts and highlighted the problems inherent with the existing set of vague rules, which had been set in 1920.[228] Designed to cover a range of scenarios that might be encountered by the armed forces

[223] Correspondence between Admiralty and Cabinet, December 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2527; Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, p.101; Osterhammel, 'China', pp.651-652.
[224] Reports from Acting-Consul Archer, July 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8707/219.
[225] Memoranda regarding actions of Royal Navy officers in China, 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8707/219.
[226] Anthony F. Pugsley and Donald Macintyre, *Destroyer Man*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1957), pp.10-19.
[227] Memoranda regarding protection of British life and property in China, 1926-1927, TNA, ADM 116/2527.
[228] Osterhammel, 'Imperialism in Transition', 278.

around the world, the emphasis in 1920 had been upon the judgement of the individual officer in command. While some officers exercised caution, others acted disproportionately, although the actions in both cases could still be well within the bounds of the identical guidance they had received. As a result, frequent new orders and guidelines were issued to the China station from October 1926 into early 1927, culminating in a comparatively comprehensive set of instructions being issued by Cabinet in May 1927.[229]

This is not to say that those rules established in 1920 remained identical throughout the period up until 1926. There was certainly discussion about revising particular aspects. One major amendment that would have clarified when violence was considered acceptable was dropped, however, as there was concern that the new definition might allow officers to simply act as they saw fit.[230] Significant faults with the orders issued to the Navy's officers, particularly the relatively inexperienced junior commanders of its China gunboats, had therefore already been identified as early as 1920. The Admiralty's unwillingness to reduce the freedoms afforded to its regional commanders, and Foreign Office objections about recognising combatants in China as belligerents had meant that such efforts to improve significantly the instructions issued to gunboat commanders failed.[231]

The presence of clearer guidance from Whitehall might not have been a guarantee of the proportionate use of force. Even with the sudden impetus in late 1926 to improve the rules of engagement, each round of instructions from Cabinet contained major revisions, intended to overcome areas where previous versions had been vague. The final May 1927 orders, for example, included clauses intended to prevent a repeat of the Nanjing Incident, which had occurred only three weeks earlier.[232] The events at Nanjing resulted in the deaths of up to 2,000 Chinese civilians through the combined fire of HMS *Emerald*, USS *Noa*, and USS *William B. Preston*.[233] The incident arose after armies of the Guomindang's Northern Expedition entered Nanjing, pushing out the troops from the incumbent warlord, and the city descended into disorder. The exact figure of civilian casualties remains a subject of

[229] Orders from Admiralty to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 17 May 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2527.
[230] Memorandum on the rules of engagement in China, December 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2527.
[231] Memorandum by the Military Branch on the legal interpretation of various international treaties, December 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2527.
[232] Orders from Admiralty to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 17 May 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2527.
[233] Other vessels from the multi-national task force were also involved in the firing over the course of events, but the three vessels listed were those who conducted the majority of the action.

debate, which will be explored in more detail in the next chapter, but the higher figures were widely circulated at the time in the Chinese press and in Soviet propaganda.[234] As a result, the incident marked another key moment in fuelling anti-foreign rhetoric among the Chinese population, highlighting how the major powers were struggling to adapt to the new dynamics in the country.[235] That violence also catalysed further action in Whitehall, and the May 1927 rules explicitly stated that all civilian casualties should be strongly avoided, a considerably stronger statement than in all prior guidance.[236] In relaying the rules, Vice Admiral Tyrwhitt added that if international civilians or military personnel were fired upon, the Navy should return fire with the minimum expenditure of ammunition and the vessels' main guns could only be used when the target was clearly visible.[237]

In terms of the December Memorandum's impact upon the guidance to the Royal Navy on the use of force in China, it was less a sudden recognition of a new reality, than a sudden jolt into action. Throughout the early 1920s there was a slow progression towards emphasis in Whitehall that the minimum level of force possible should be used, and primarily in the defence of individuals rather than property. The rapid progress made in tightening the rules of engagement in 1926 and 1927, reflected a long-term failure among the British establishment to act upon well-established concerns. The shift towards a preference for less lethal strategies stretched back to the First World War and the influence that conflict had upon wider British attitudes towards casualties as a result of military action. This supports Edmund Fung's argument that despite efforts to frame that declaration in December 1926 as moralistic, it was instead driven by cold hard recognition of the new circumstances.[238] There was already a background degree of concern about the deaths of innocent civilians, but until that point there had been insufficient interest in ensuring the guidelines issued to gunboat commanders were up to the purpose. Moralistic or ethical concerns only went so far when dealing with threats to the British Empire from non-White populations, particularly those apparently in league with the Soviet Union. Moreover, what happened in December was only one step in a longer process that continued over much of 1927. Over the course of

[234] E.g. Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain in Shanghai*, p.50; Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution in China*, p.95, and Stevens, ''Duncan Force", pp.159-160.
[235] Murdoch, 'Exploiting Anti-Imperialism', 88.
[236] Admiralty orders to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 17 May 1927, TNA ADM 116/2527.
[237] Admiral Tyrwhitt's orders to China Station, 18 May 1927, TNA ADM 116/2527.
[238] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.101-104.

that year, the wider legal setting changed from one in which individual commanders were afforded considerable, indeed excessive, personal freedom to conduct diplomacy, to one with much tighter control from the metropole.

No matter how clear and strict a set of orders or instructions, the deployment of armed units into a threatening conflict zone almost invariably results in some form of violent clashes. That is particularly true when dealing with a heated environment, such as the one in 1920s China, where there was growing ideological opposition to the presence of foreign military forces. For example, when sent upriver to Chengdu with two merchant vessels in June 1925 to evacuate missionaries and foreign civilians, HMS *Teal* came under fire from Chinese soldiers on the river bank and returned fire in response.[239] The Chinese troops appear to have believed the British ships were heading up river for hostile purposes. The vessels were not heading towards an official treaty port, nor had they declared their intentions to the local Chinese general.

Incidents such as this were particularly common in early 1927, when the Northern Expedition reached the Yangtze. In April 1927 alone eleven reports were made of Royal Navy vessels on the river exchanging fire with organised units of Chinese soldiers.[240] In one such example, HMS *Magnolia* came under rifle fire from Guomindang affiliated forces near Shanghai, in the early morning twilight, to which the British warship returned fire.[241] Within ten minutes both sides ceased firing, however, after the sloop was identified as a British vessel and not one belonging to a rival Chinese force. More cautious orders for the naval personnel may have been intended to reduce the number and severity of flashpoints, but over the decade many areas of China were active warzones, where mistakes of identity could occur with subsequent events escalating very quickly.

Changing approaches to imperial policing

Some of the clashes involving the Royal Navy in China were a result of a subtler factor, the difficulty British officials had in coming to terms with the nascent sense of nationalism among the urban Chinese population. China's long-held *Tianxia* concept of the world, where the imperial court was of primary importance and 'barbarians' were peripheral concerns,

[239] Memoranda by Palairet regarding incident involving HMS *Teal,* July 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8707/219.
[240] Hansard, 4 May 1927, vol.205, cc.1596-7.
[241] Ship's log of HMS *Magnolia* 1926-1927, TNA, ADM 53/80211.

was being replaced with one focused on becoming a respected and independent modern nation state.[242] As a result, the deployment of international troops into Nanjing as the new capital of nationalist China, for example, was much more of an affront to the local population in 1927 than it had been a decade before.[243] The British establishment, including the Admiralty and naval personnel, were all guilty of acting at times as they had been doing for many years previously, seemingly without realising that in the new environment those actions were almost certain to provoke a widespread hostile reaction. This is not to say that the acts themselves were not intended to provoke a reaction, but rather the potential for alternative, adverse reactions was not understood.

In December 1926, for example, Rear Admiral John Cameron chose to inspect a parade of naval personnel on shore at Hankou, after weeks of Chinese protests against the foreign concessions in the city.[244] Cameron acted in line with long-established practice on the China Station, although with less fanfare than similar parades at Hankou eighteen months earlier, after the May Thirtieth Incident, when HMS *Despatch's* brass band went ashore to 'create an impression' among the Chinese protestors.[245] The Navy had long believed such parades were an effective display of force, to intimidate and subdue the local population.[246] Whether they always had that result, or sometimes provoked greater bemusement at the spectacle is another question. Within days of Cameron's parade in 1926, however, the situation in Hankou escalated from *Magnolia* posting twenty men as part of the force to guard the concession, to every man possible from all British warships in the port being sent ashore. The situation was sufficiently tense that the crew were ordered to sleep wearing full equipment at night, with half the crew always awake ashore. While it is difficult retrospectively to apply causality, the major protests that occurred so soon after the parade suggests it had the opposite effect to the one intended. Rather than intimidating the local population, the move fanned the flames of resentment. While new rules of engagement were intended to limit the possibility that the Navy might provoke protests through the use

[242] Xu Guogi, 'China and Empire', in *Empires at War: 1911-1923*, ed. by Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), pp.216-218.
[243] Lipkin, *Useless to the State*, pp.9-10.
[244] Ship's log of HMS *Magnolia* 1926-1927, TNA, ADM 53/80211.
[245] W.T. Allen (ed.), *With HMS Despatch to China 1925-1927*, (Shanghai: Willow Pattern Press, 1927), p.14.
[246] Jeremy E. Taylor, 'The Bund: Littoral Space of Empire in the Treaty Ports of East Asia', *Social History* 27/2 (2002), 137.

of violence, the very act of deploying servicemen into the city had in itself came to be regarded as a hostile act.

While the British establishment struggled to understand those local factors, the approach taken towards imperial policing was already changing. Some of this dated back to the aftermath of the unilateral action taken by Britain in the Second Boer War.[247] Both the international and domestic reaction to the tragic events in southern Africa left a strong scar on British foreign policy. The reputation of Britain's armed services had been damaged by the struggles against what was, at first, a largely amateur militia. The resulting heavy-handed use of new ideas and tactics, particularly concentration camps for Boer civilians, also meant that the British Empire was pilloried in the international press. Contemporary events in China, specifically the Anglo-French looting and burning of the Summer Palace in Beijing, had added to that wave of criticism.[248] An early sign of this less assertive attitude was seen in 1907 when Russian troops entered northern Persia, which in the nineteenth century would most likely have provoked a firm response. Instead, Britain opened negotiations over creating spheres of influence within the country.[249] There remained a desire to defend the Empire, but the Victorian confidence that Britain reigned supreme had been shaken.

The British Empire may have emerged from the First World War as a victor, but questions about how Britain approached sub-state threats around the world soon re-appeared. Nowhere was this more apparent than the indiscriminate use of aerial bombing as a method of imperial policing Somaliland in 1920 and then elsewhere in the Middle East. Those events highlighted the unpopularity of civilian casualties in the efforts to defend the empire, and often the counter-productivity of the tactic when trying to secure imperial stability.[250] There were voices that spoke favourably about the use of repressive violence against civilian populations favourably. Anthony Clayton has argued that it proved particularly popular with the Colonial Office as a cheap method of imperial policing. Such attitudes tended to focus on the cost of maintaining the Empire, with military aircraft seen as the next step from the Maxim gun in enforcing Britain's will around the world. Using aerial bombing and strafing,

[247] O'Brien, *The Titan Refreshed,* p.149.
[248] Bickers, *The Scramble for China*, pp.149-150.
[249] Sabahi, *British Policy in Persia*, p.33.
[250] Victor G. Kiernan, *Colonial Empires and Armies 1815-1960*, (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), p.196; Porter, *Absent Minded Imperialists,* p.281.

for example, had helped reduce the British Army presence in Iraq from twenty-three to just two battalions, over a seven-year period. Clayton also makes it clear, however, that the events in the Middle East were an exception rather than the rule.[251] The approach may have proven popular among some quarters in Whitehall, but the wider reception was less forgiving. Disquiet about the morality and ethics of such tactics affected the RAF pilots themselves, with many becoming increasingly unhappy with being ordered to attack civilians. Some even resigned over what they saw as a 'cowardly' approach.[252] As a result there was a growing unwillingness to use significant levels of force unilaterally, to push British diplomatic ends, except where it was used to defend existing territory against a direct external attack.

In relation to China by the 1920s, that slowly growing sense of caution contributed to Britain repeatedly attempting to secure an 'Allied' response, rather than act in isolation and therefore become the focus of criticism. In dealing with piracy in Chinese waters for example, Britain attempted to develop a united international response. That effort was undermined by the unwillingness of the USA to support any major action, which led to both Italy and France also abstaining, leaving only Japan willing to co-operate on major schemes, a country no longer considered to be a reliable ally.[253] While there was some mutual co-operation in practice, the absence of a unified front meant that the success of joint anti-piracy operations was heavily limited. Likewise, when British forces were deployed to Shanghai in 1927, the Committee for Imperial Defence agreed that they would not object to Japan sending troops into the region around the city should it be considered necessary.[254] There were no doubt reservations about what exactly might occur if that were to happen. Given concerns about the risks and legality involved in sending British personnel outside of Shanghai's boundaries, however, an unofficial and therefore deniable arrangement with Japan could prove acceptable.[255] Not only would informal collaboration shelter the British Empire from domestic and international criticism, but it would also avoid paying the full cost involved.

[251] Clayton, *The British Empire as Superpower,* pp.212-227; Clayton, 'Deceptive Might', p.290.
[252] Porter, *Absent Minded Imperialists,* p.281.
[253] Assorted memoranda on piracy in Chinese waters, 1929, TNA, CAB 24/202/24.
[254] Committee for Imperial Defence report on the situation in China, 29 March 1927, TNA, CAB 24/186/9.
[255] Teichman, *Affairs of China*, p.159.

The shifting attitude within the British government away from the callous Victorian attitude towards killing colonial civilians was only ever a slow and gradual process. Moreover, it was one driven more by a desire to avoid negative headlines, than by a sudden change in heart over the morality, although that was a contributing factor. As a result, while there was a greater preference for multilateral approaches that avoided innocent deaths going into the 1920s, this did not stop British officials and officers from ordering violent actions to suppress and subjugate populations around the world, including China.

Summary

Upon its return to peacetime duties in East Asia in 1919, the Royal Navy was operating in a new era, one no longer defined by British Imperial dominance, but one scarred by the First World War. Amid massive post-war cutbacks across the Service as a whole, however, the China Station was restored in large part back to the state it had been throughout most of the fifteen years before 1914. That continuity is really quite surprising, given the changes that had occurred over the 1910s. The world order had changed. The USA was increasingly influential, Germany and Austria defeated, France exhausted, Russia in a state of revolutionary flux, and Japan taking an independent path in shaping developments across Asia. With it the entire global balance of naval power had shifted, away from Europe and towards the Pacific, and yet the Admiralty attempted to continue as if it was business as usual. The China Station had never just been about those major power struggles, and within its remit was the protection of British trade and interests in China. With the Xinhai Revolution having transformed the political situation in the country, and challenges such as piracy growing in complexity and scale, the Admiralty's stance is all the more remarkable.

In this regards, existing imperial history accounts require amending, given that for the first half of the 1920s the Royal Navy's presence on the Chinese coast was actually quite modest, particularly when compared with the tasks it faced. A score of smaller warships patrolling thousands of miles of coastline and waterways were a drop in the ocean, against the threat of piracy. Moreover, it was a vast task that the Navy itself wished to avoid, as pirate tactics increasingly focused upon hijackings and riverine small boat attacks, neither of which could be countered effectively by a light spread of relatively slow gunboats. In itself, this is a relatively small change to how we see Britain's presence around China in this period. However, it does emphasise the near futility of a task that the China Station had only

accepted with great reluctance. Where this has a significant impact upon our understanding, is in what followed in the second half of the decade.

The scale of the large increase in the fleet deployed to China, quite suddenly in late 1926, is of far greater importance than generally acknowledged. Putting the Navy on the verge of mobilising its reserves showed just how seriously the Admiralty and British government were about defending core locations, such as Shanghai. The December Memorandum of 1926 might have shown a new willingness of the British Government to return some secondary imperial assets, but core ports like Shanghai were non-negotiable.[256] In this regards, it is key to note that many of the additional warships were only deployed to China after the December Memorandum had been announced. Moreover, that task force was globally significant in its size, despite being almost entirely absent from the naval historiography of the period. As has been identified with other topics, the whims of key early naval historians, such as Arthur Marder and Stephen Roskill, have had a huge influence upon what we have since remembered and studied when looking at the interwar period.[257]

With communist links to the Guomindang and its National Revolutionary Army, and the belief within the British establishment that unrest in China was part of a wider Soviet plot, Britain's response was aimed at a far wider audience. While much of the force was despatched slightly before overall Anglo-Soviet relations hit a nadir at the start of April 1927, with the Arcos Affair, events in China have to be taken against that wider background. Sending a naval force vastly in excess of even that sent by the Imperial Japanese Navy, and of greater power than the entire Soviet Navy, was a global statement and a reminder of British power. The Shanghai Defence Force was formed primarily as a means of imperial enforcement, as highlighted by previous historians. However, the Royal Navy's vast task force was also sent to ensure that the British Empire was not defeated in what it considered to be a form of proxy war against the Soviet Union.

Before, during, and after the Royal Navy's surge of warships to China there were further changes in the wider world that affected the way they approached their task, beyond the nature of the tasks and the resources available. The rules of engagement issued to Royal

[256] Osterhammel, 'China', p.653.
[257] Moretz, *Thinking Wisely, Planning Boldly*, pp.69-70.

Navy officers also changed over the period. This occurred most notably in the period between the Wanxian Incident and late 1927, where some of the catastrophic clashes in China highlighted how weak and badly worded some of the instructions were. Those events did not start that process, however, with changes to and debate over the Admiralty's instructions dating back to 1920, which introduced many core tenets about avoiding civilian casualties. There was some appreciation that vague guidance could have deadly results, but insufficient willingness to push through major amendments that might avoid such calamitous mistakes. This came against a background where there was growing concern about negative perceptions of Britain's imperial policing, particularly when it resulted in civilian casualties. While updating the rules of engagement was a task largely set aside for another day, however, far more visible and controversial efforts were adopted that went in the opposite direction. Aerial imperial policing was an approach only tested to a significant degree in the Middle East, to displace British Army battalions with cheaper RAF squadrons, but the Admiralty did turn to new technology as a means of improving the efficiency and effectiveness with which it maintained the outposts of the British Empire in East Asia.

Chapter Three: Technological development and imperial policing

> One of the principal purposes of naval warfare is to establish a maritime superiority so decisive that military force can be brought into play in the form of descents upon the enemy's coasts.[1]

Between 1812 and the 1890s Britain's global naval supremacy had enabled regular, if piecemeal, additions of territory to the British Empire. The amphibious landings and gunboat diplomacy used to build and defend the Empire relied upon Britain having the capability to safely shift its modest military resources between regions by sea.[2] During the First Opium War, for example, Britain's ability to ship its military forces between Guangzhou and Tianjin was a key factor in neutralising the Qing armies' numerical superiority. Without an established railway or paved road network in China, the only quick and effective means of transporting troops and equipment was by water.[3] Britain's superior mobility was only possible because the Royal Navy, along with ships from the East India Company, achieved complete naval superiority in China's littoral regions.[4] The outdated coastal vessels available to the Qing could not compete with the Royal Navy's warships – some of the most advanced in the world at the time. For the remainder of the nineteenth century, that on-going disparity in capabilities helped the Royal Navy keep the China Station's running costs below the perceived rewards derived from Britain's informal empire in China. Technology played an integral role in shaping the Royal Navy's, and as a consequence the British Empire's, relationship with China.

By the 1920s, further enlarging the British Empire was no longer a priority in Whitehall. The Victorian strategy of using amphibious operations as part of a policy of gunboat diplomacy, however, remained key to maintaining the existing imperial system. Relatively few warships and men could be used to secure large areas, so long as it was possible to concentrate rapidly a force of sufficient strength at key locations during time of crisis. Financial restrictions after the First World War required the military and naval cost of Empire to be

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[1] Charles E. Callwell, *Military Operations and Maritime Preponderance: Their Relation and Interdependence*, (London: Blackwood, 1905), p.63.
[2] John R. Ferris, 'The Greatest Power on Earth: Great Britain in the 1920s', *International History Review* 13/4, (1991), 732-734.
[3] Edward S. May, *Principles and Problems of Imperial Defence,* (London: Sonnenschein & Co., 1903), p.130.
[4] Lovell, *The Opium War*, pp.111-115.

kept to a minimum. Excluding the hefty burden of First World War pensions, roughly thirty percent of naval expenditure by the early 1920s went towards paying ships' crews, with provisions and clothing accounting for a further ten percent.[5] In contrast, total pay and victualling costs had only come to twenty five percent of the pre-war 1914 budget. This was despite the Navy having undergone an overall reduction in service personnel by roughly a third, from 146,000 to just under 100,000. A key factor in that shift had been the significant increases in naval pay during the war, to better match those available in the British Army and partially compensate for wartime inflation.[6] As a result, the Royal Navy's operating costs (excluding pensions) had increased from £46 million in 1913/14 to £55 million in 1922/23, while the overall naval vote was almost back down to the same nominal level as before the war.[7] There were attempts to save money by reducing the number of civilians employed by the Royal Navy, but it was recognised that this would only yield marginal gains.[8] If the imperial system was to remain financially viable it was ever more crucial to minimise the number of service personnel required to police and defend the British Empire.

The China Station had been fortunate that its manpower had remained broadly unaffected by the cutbacks, from its pre-war complement.[9] That left roughly 4,400 servicemen afloat on the Station, with hundreds more working in the shore facilities at Singapore, Hong Kong, and Weihai. Precise numbers fluctuated a little as warships were not always fully manned in peacetime, and some of the smaller gunboats were placed in reserve with skeleton crews for short periods. Against the background of overall cuts, however, maintaining the force on the Chinese coast cost the Admiralty, on balance, a greater proportion of the Navy's budget than it had done before the cuts. Efforts were made throughout the 1920s to raise locally financed Royal Navy Reserve units around the world to ease the burden of local defence duties. This included the China Station, although it was not until 1933 that such a force was formed at Hong Kong.[10] Locally hired Chinese crewmen were also employed as cooks,

[5] Report on the reduction of naval expenditure by the sub-committee of staffs from the Admiralty, Air Ministry and War Office, January 20 1923, TNA, CAB 24/160/72, pp.4-12.
[6] Correspondence between Admiralty and Cabinet about the Navy Estimates 1925-1926, 1925, TNA, ADM 116/2300.
[7] Report on the reduction of naval expenditure, TNA, CAB 24/160/72, p.5; Ferris, 'Treasury Control', 880.
[8] Cabinet Committee on Reduction of National Expenditure, January 1923, TNA, CAB 24/160/72; Navy Estimates for 1920-21, 1920, TNA, T 1/12533/16620.
[9] Navy List, March 1913, NLS, p.270; Navy List, December 1920, NLS, p.714.
[10] Spence, *Colonial naval culture*, pp.18-21.

stewards, and for loading coal or other supplies, as a cheaper way of counteracting chronic understaffing, particularly on the lightly-manned Upper Yangtze gunboats. While many of those seamen built bonds of friendship and loyalty with their foreign shipmates, during times of crisis they stayed ashore, however, fearing that their families would be threatened if they were seen to be helping the British.[11] Adopting new technology could provide a qualitative increase in the Royal Navy's capabilities, potentially easing the demand for manpower, to limit the cost of maintaining Britain's 'imperial gendarmerie'. The use of new 'mechanical devices' for that purpose was even explicitly recommended at Cabinet level, during the formation of the Ten Year Rule in 1919.[12]

Advanced technology was expected to enhance far more than just the Royal Navy's capacity to engage potential opponents, particularly in a peacetime imperial environment. The benefits sought can be separated into three broad areas; maintaining prestige, understanding events, and responding to crises. For the first of these, new equipment was often used to reinforce global perceptions of Britain's power. Imperial prestige had long served an important role in convincing both foreign governments and overseas populations that the British Empire could be a dangerous opponent or a valuable ally. In essence, the use of technology exemplified the 'stick and carrot' metaphor. The 'stick' - an underlying threat that the British Empire could wield unparalleled force - was used as a deterrent to try and avoid costly deployments of manpower. In contrast, the 'carrot' was the possibility that Britain might share some of its technology and expertise with those considered to be friends. In the early 1920s, for example, Britain provided both France and Greece with technical assistance to aid their efforts in naval aviation, as recent and potentially future allies.[13] The carrot also tended to come with an unwritten understanding, particularly where the technology gulf was significant, that the recipient would put British armaments manufacturers at the front of the queue for contracts.[14]

In the second case, the British Empire's ability to understand global geopolitical developments relied upon the timely collation of information and its subsequent

[11] Rear-Admiral Cameron to Admiral Sinclair, 26 July 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[12] Ferris, 'Treasury Control', 871.
[13] Geoffrey Till, *Air Power and the Royal Navy 1914-1945*, (London: Jane, 1979), p.63.
[14] See: Donald Stoker, *Britain, France and the Naval Arms Trade in the Baltic 1919-1939: Grand Strategy and Failure*, (London: Routledge, 2012), pp.65-101.

dissemination to the relevant offices of government. For East Asia in the interwar period, and China in particular, the Foreign Office and Royal Navy formed the two key branches of Britain's intelligence gathering and official communications apparatus. The speed at which that information could be gathered and passed on affected both the nature and uniformity of Britain's policies and responses to crises. This could be in relation to either extremely localised events, such as piracy in Daya Bay, or the overall relationship between Britain and China. Moreover, using new technology could increase the coverage of events around East Asia, without significant increases in manpower and therefore cost.

Finally, Britain's responses to both on-going threats and extraordinary crises, such as the one seen in 1927, were influenced by the resources at the Royal Navy's disposal. Evolutions in fighting equipment, particularly the adoption of 'quick-fire' and automatic guns in the 1880s and 1890s, had previously altered how Britain dealt with sub-state violence as the Empire expanded.[15] The first generation of British quick-fire naval guns, for example, could deliver roughly ten times as many shells per minute as those they replaced.[16] Such weaponry had been instrumental in enabling Britain to subjugate large populations using only modest military forces. The First World War produced another similar step-shift in capability, catalysing the development of new platforms for bringing the Navy's manpower and weaponry into, or evacuating personnel out of, a conflict zone. Using naval aircraft or larger, faster ships, for example, provided the potential to transform the way in which the Royal Navy could respond to adverse scenarios. This did not necessarily involve acts of violence, but had the potential to influence how evacuations of civilians were conducted. As the area that saw the most regular and active operational employment by the Royal Navy during the 1920s, China would be a peacetime testing ground for those evolving new technologies.[17]

<u>Maintaining imperial prestige:</u>

Exploiting the latest technologies in order to intimidate and impress around the world, formed an integral part of the British Empire's strategy to emphasise its superiority. In

[15] Anthony B. Chan, *Arming the Chinese*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982), pp.47-48.
[16] J. Campbell, 'Naval Armaments and Armour', in *Steam, Steel, and Shellfire*, ed. by Robert Gardiner and Andrew Lambert (London: Conway Maritime, 1992), pp.161-164.
[17] Moretz, *The Royal Navy and the Capital Ship,* p.258.

particular, flag-waving tours by British warships were not just an opportunity for socialising with other nation's dignitaries and obtaining information. Those port visits were intended to emphasise the power of the Royal Navy and wider British Empire, with displays of Britain's newest technologies often deliberately included in the carefully choreographed pomp and ceremony.[18] The Special Service Squadron's 1923-24 'Empire Cruise', for example, was led by the pride of the British fleet and largest warship in the world at the time – HMS *Hood*. During port calls, *Hood's* powerful searchlights were frequently used to illuminate distant objects, given the reportedly striking effect they had upon local dignitaries.[19] The visually dramatic party-trick also came with the unsubtle message that anywhere the ship could illuminate, it could also bombard, by day or night.[20]

In effect this approach of applying technology imitated the way sport had previously been used as a subtle element of Britain's gunboat diplomacy. Daniel Spence argues, for example, that rugby and cricket matches were invariably staged by British gunboats during port calls in the late nineteenth century to emphasise British mariners' physical prowess. Even cricket matches were apparently understood by foreign officials to carry the message that it was better to accept cricket balls than cannon balls.[21] The changing focus from physical to technical superiority had come as a result of the mechanisation of violence in the late nineteenth century. While the Special Service Squadron only briefly met with the China Station at Singapore, technology was still used on a day-to-day basis to reinforce British imperial prestige in the East Asia.

Immediately prior to the First World War simple displays of moderately advanced vessels were generally considered sufficient to emphasise Britain's power. The number of ports that could be visited was normally seen as the critical measure, rather than the scale of the impression made at each location. The officer commanding Britain's gunboats stationed on the upper Yangtze in 1907, Lieutenant Commander George Todd, argued in just such a way when requesting additional gunboats for his force.

[18] Elliot, *The Cross and the Ensign*, p.102.
[19] Jon Wise, *The Role of the Royal Navy in South America, 1920-1970*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.20-21.
[20] Harrington, 'The Mighty Hood', 179-180.
[21] Daniel O. Spence, *A History of the Royal Navy: Empire and Imperialism*, (London: Tauris, 2015), p.98.

> This would enable the Flag to be shown at many places it has, as yet, not been seen and would doubtless tend to increase the respect of the Chinese for us as a Nation, and impress upon them the preponderating nature of our interest both political and commercial in this part of China.[22]

When that same year one junior officer experimented with using displays of fireworks to amplify the impact caused by his gunboat arriving at Chinese cities, it was politely suggested to him by his senior colleagues that such behaviour was unbefitting of a Royal Navy warship. The White Ensign alone was felt to be sufficient in earning the respect of local populations. Indeed, a rumour was circulating the China Station at the time that one group of pirates had immediately jumped overboard, into the night, when calmly informed by a Chinese crewmember that they had mistakenly boarded a British gunboat. The British crew were said to have slept soundly below deck, shielded by an invisible imperial aura. [23] Such stories, whether true or not, appear to have reinforced a belief among the British that the Chinese population were in absolute awe of the Royal Navy.

Relying on simple numerical displays of strength faced numerous problems by the 1920s. The Fisher reforms and subsequent destruction of the German East Asia Squadron had led to a smaller surface force being based on the China Station in 1920 than that in 1907.[24] While probably better suited to policing and patrol duties, many of the warships posted to China post-war were also less prestigious vessels. The 10,000 tonne armoured cruisers *Monmouth* and *Hampshire* had been replaced by 4,000 tonne light cruisers. Four slow and lightly armed sloops and additional gunboats supplanted a destroyer flotilla. The latter change even led to unsuccessful calls in the Commons by Lieutenant Commander Joseph Kenworthy MP for a destroyer flotilla to be returned to China. Kenworthy's argument was that 'sloops cannot show the flag with dignity in peace nor with effect in war'.[25] While the pre-war destroyers were quite small by later standards, displacing less than 1,000 tonnes, they were warships designed for operating at sea with the battle fleet and reflected that in their appearance. In contrast, few people who have seen HMS *President* moored on the

[22] Letter from Lieutenant-Commander G.J. Todd to Vice Admiral Moore, 17 July 1907, TNA, ADM 125/127.
[23] Unpublished autobiography of G.C. Dickens, undated, KCLMA, Catalogue ID 1114, Chapter two.
[24] Navy List, December 1920, (1921), NLS, p.714; O'Brien, 'The Titan Refreshed', 150; Padfield, *Rule Britannia,* p.222.
[25] Hansard, 18 March 1920, vol.126 cc.2513-2514. Kenworthy went on to say that the large submarine flotilla attached to the China Station was strategically useful, but had no value for waving the flag.

Thames, the lone survivor from the *Flower*-class sloop family, have ever realised that it was once a warship, since its deck-guns were removed.[26] The *Flower*-class had been hastily constructed in wartime as minesweepers and later to escort convoys, and so they looked and performed like small merchantmen rather than world-class warships.

Among the various strategic reasons for the switch, the Admiralty was partially driven by two relatively simple practical considerations. The mainstay *W* and *V* class destroyers were notoriously uncomfortable for their crews and lacked refrigerators, whereas on the *Flower* class sloops food had to be carried on the open deck between the kitchen and mess.[27] It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that with the return to peace, the former were stationed in Europe and the latter in warmer climates. Overall, most of the new vessels posted to the China Station after the First World War were suited to specific military tasks; only a few had the right attributes to make a powerful impression on those who saw them.

In contrast Britain's main rivals in the region were increasing and strengthening their regional fleets. Japan started the decade with an order for five modern gunboats, which by late 1923 had doubled its permanent China river force.[28] With the expansion and modernisation of the IJN's main fleet during the First World War, many pre-war destroyers were deployed on patrol duties around China, although on paper they were based in Japan.[29] Those destroyers were obsolete for fleet duties and had been re-rated as second or third class, with most due for scrapping, but they made adequate gunboat substitutes to increase the visibility of Japan's growing maritime power. Likewise, while HMS *Hood* and its compatriots did not venture beyond Singapore, the IJN sent touring squadrons around East Asia, including battlecruisers twice the size of the China Station's flagship HMS *Hawkins.*[30] Japan was waving the flag as Victorian Britain had often done, and could do so with far greater ease given the comparatively short distance from its main naval yards.

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[26] HMS *President* (formerly *Saxifrage*) was built and used as a decoy ship, but its appearance was not substantially different from the rest of the Flower-class family. It is currently in Chatham awaiting repairs, but spent many decades on the Thames.

[27] David K. Brown, *Nelson to Vanguard: Warship Design and Development 1923-1945,* (London: Chatham Publishing, 2006), pp.86 & 134.

[28] Chesneau, *All the World's Fighting Ships,* p.177.

[29] E.g. Ship's log of HMS *Bluebell* 1920, TNA, ADM 53/35681; Ship's log of HMS *Magnolia* 1924-1925, TNA, ADM 53/80209.

[30] E.g. Ship's log of HMS *Diomede* 1924-1925, TNA, ADM 53/75887.

Even more crucially than the IJN's rising sun, the USN's Asiatic Fleet received eighteen brand new destroyers between 1918 and 1922, which had a sufficiently shallow draught to navigate as far upriver as Hankou.[31] Those destroyers were larger, faster, and more heavily armed than any of the smaller warships Britain or Japan had stationed off the Chinese coast. That increase also resulted in the Asiatic Fleet receiving a full Admiral on a permanent attachment from September 1919, senior to Vice Admiral Alexander Duff who was commanding the China Station at the time. Previously the Royal Navy's regional commander had always been senior to his USN counterpart. The balance was only restored in July 1921 when Duff was promoted to full Admiral, with his replacement the following year also newly appointed as a full Admiral - Arthur Leveson. Royal Navy officers were a little dismissive of the disparity, however, as often the American 'Admiral' only possessed a temporary rank. Admirals Edwin Anderson, Clarence Williams, and Mark Bristol, for example, all reverted to being Rear-Admirals upon leaving the Asiatic Fleet.[32] Nonetheless, the Chinese civilian officials they encountered were unlikely to be aware of that subtle distinction.

The USN was also making frequent requests in Washington for modern gunboats to strengthen its Yangtze Patrol, in order to raise America's profile and influence in China. After much lobbying, an order for six new mid-sized vessels was finally approved in 1924.[33] Delays in securing funding and then during construction at Shanghai, however, meant that the first of those new American gunboats was not launched until 1927. The one area where the USN Asiatic Fleet did not experience an upgrade, was with its core flagship, which was first the pre-war cruiser USS *Huron* (launched 1904), which was replaced in December 1926 by the equally outdated USS *Pittsburgh* (launched 1903). In contrast, the British flagship was first HMS *Hawkins* (launched 1917) and then HMS *Kent* (launched 1926), both of which were on their inaugural commissioned voyages. As the China Station was also formed around the Fifth Light Cruiser Squadron, it remained the most powerful naval force based in the immediate locality. The growing strength of both America and Japan's deployments on the Chinese coast, however, meant that Britain's margin of superiority was slim and increasingly difficult to demonstrate to civilian observers.

[31] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue*, p.3. The number of destroyers in the Asiatic Fleet varied during the 1920s, but generally averaged around 18.
[32] Diary of Commander Cedric Holland, 1928.
[33] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* pp.70-71.

Along with the shifting balance of international power in Chinese waters, Britain's gunboat force was being affected by changes within China itself. After the collapse of the Qing rule, the fighting between rival warlords had resulted in a rapid modernisation in the land-based military equipment used in China. This was part of a long term trend, as European and American technological supremacy in that area had been waning since the 1870s and 1880s, relative to China, but that process accelerated in the years after the Xinhai Revolution.[34] By May 1924, for example, even a relatively small band of 300 bandits operating near Guangzhou was recorded as being armed with four field guns and thirty Thompson sub-machine guns.[35] The 'Tommy Gun' had only become available for sale in 1921 and was a far superior squad-level weapon than the heavy Lewis machine-guns and bolt-action Lee-Enfield rifles carried by British service personnel at that time.[36] Where the Royal Navy could keep their distance, particularly while sailing along the lower Yangtze, the greater range and accuracy of the British weaponry was an advantage. Along narrower waterways or ashore that was not the case. While the average Chinese soldier or bandit was still likely to be less well armed than the British sailors and marines they might encounter, that advantage could no longer be taken for granted.

Steel plating, splinter mattresses, and sandbags were often used as relatively effective supplementary counter-measures against small-arms fire, with the river itself aiding defence by keeping snipers at a distance from the warships.[37] Caught by surprise and unprepared, HMS *Robin* reported in October 1920 that only minor damage was sustained and no injuries suffered when it was suddenly machine-gunned in the Pearl River delta.[38] The distance from shore alone had helped avoid a more serious incident for the slow-moving gunboat. Likewise, the better-prepared gunboat HMS *Gnat* counted over 100 rifle rounds fired at it near Chongqing in March 1926, of which seventeen hit the vessel, but only three risked causing injury.[39]

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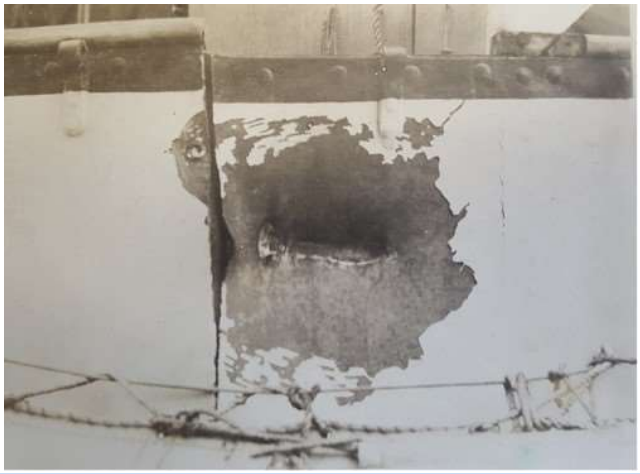
[34] Benjamin A. Elman, 'Naval Warfare and the Refraction of China's Self-Strengthening Reforms into Scientific and Technological Failure, 1865-1895', *Modern Asian Studies* 38/2 (2004), 317; Hamish Ion, 'The China Squadron and the Boxer Uprising', in *British Naval Strategy East of Suez, 1900-2000: Influences and Actions*, ed. by Greg Kennedy (Abingdon: Frank Cass, 2005), pp.48-56.
[35] Memorandum by Commander Maxwell-Scott, 2 December 1924, TNA, ADM 116/2262.
[36] George Forty, *British Army Handbook 1939-1945,* (London: Dreadnought Books, 2000), pp.140-180.
[37] F.S.W. de Winton, *Ships in Bottles,* (unpublished), KCLMA, Catalogue ID 1113, p.29.
[38] Commodore Bowden-Smith to Vice-Admiral Duff, 1 January 1921, TNA, ADM 1/8593/133.
[39] HMS *Gnat* to Rear-Admiral Yangtze, 1 March 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2510.

The counter-measures taken could do little against heavy weapons though, and a well-aimed artillery shell fired at relatively close range would cause significant damage.[40] On 29 May 1924, for example, HMS *Tarantula* came across two merchant vessels near Guangzhou that had been badly damaged by artillery shells fired from shore, with numerous casualties reported on both vessels.[41] With next to no armour plating on most of the Royal Navy's gunboats, they were little better suited to facing such an attack than those civilian steamers. Indeed, the smaller gunboats like HMS *Robin* at just 85 tonnes and 108 foot long would be at risk of suffering critical damage and numerous casualties if hit by an accurate artillery shell.[42] HMS *Bee* had a lucky escape from such a scenario on 8 September 1926, when fired upon by two field guns, leading to one shell inflicting substantial, but largely superficial, damage to its steel hull (see Figure 8).[43] Britain's gunboats still held an advantage given their firepower, but they were no longer able to cruise the river almost immune from harm, as they had done in prior decades. Even then, in the Victorian era it was not unusual for a few gunboats to carry the same weight of firepower as a small army, but by the 1920s that was no longer the case.[44]

Figure 8: Damage to HMS *Bee* 8 September 1926[45]



Fortunately for Britain, the Royal Navy's perceived power protected it from serious, organised attacks for most of the decade. Between 1923 and 1925, for example, the

[40] E.g. Midshipman's log of P.W. Burnett, 1927, KCLMA, Catalogue ID 2243; Ship's log of HMS *Magnolia* 1926-1927, TNA, ADM 53/80211.
[41] Commodore Grace to Admiral Leveson, 10 June 1924, TNA, ADM 116/2262.
[42] Konstam, *Yangtze River Gunboats*, Appendix.
[43] Photograph album of Major Frederick Burden RMLI, 8 September 1926, RMM, 1992/112/1; Report by Rear-Admiral Cameron to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 17 September 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[44] Till, *Seapower*, p.276.
[45] Photograph album of Major Frederick Burden RMLI, 8 September 1926, RMM, 1992/112/1.

quarterly reports sent to the Admiralty from the China Station often noted that no shots had been fired near or at British warships. This was despite regular reports of other vessels using the Yangtze and Pearl Rivers having been hit by both small arms and artillery.[46] In one incident in early 1923 the Chinese cruiser *Chao Ho*, after threatening to bombard 'enemy forces' in Shantou, was dissuaded from doing so by the arrival of the smaller HMS *Magnolia.*[47] The British warship may have posed a limited direct threat by itself, but a fight with the Royal Navy was almost certain to lead to the later destruction of the *Chao Ho*. It was not until May 2 1927, therefore, that heavy weapons were first used against Royal Navy vessels, when the destroyer HMS *Wanderer* came under rifle and artillery fire from Guomindang troops near Jiangyin.[48] *Wanderer's* subsequent, immediate heavy counter-bombardment was intended to remind the Chinese troops of the Royal Navy's superior firepower. Lieutenant Commander Louis Hamilton nonetheless felt that his ship had been lucky to escape with only one wounded sailor, with some shells only narrowly missing the ship's superstructure. As China's soldiers and bandits were increasingly capable of and willing to challenge British warships in this way, the invisible protection provided by the Royal Navy's waning prestige was of even greater importance.

The rapid modernisation in East Asia's weapons pool after the First World War was not purely a hindrance to the Royal Navy. In 1921 for example, the SVC was loaned a range of surplus wartime weaponry by the British Government, including four 4.5" howitzers, 900 rifles, and twenty-four machine guns.[49] Likewise, the American and Italian governments made similar, if much smaller, donations towards the SVC companies manned by their citizens.[50] Shanghai Municipal's Council then purchased a further 400 brand new rifles, along with revolvers, steel helmets, and grenades. The Council also funded the construction of ten locally-designed armoured cars over the decade, with seven in service by early 1925.[51] Prior to these purchases the SVC had generally relied on obsolete British Army weaponry donated as it was phased out of use, with infrequent small supplementary

[46] E.g. Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 11 October 1923, TNA, ADM 1/8665/142.
[47] Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 17 March 1923, TNA, ADM 1/8665/142.
[48] Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-1928, NMM, HTN 214.
[49] Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1920, SMA, U1-1-933; Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1921, SMA, U1-1-934; Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1922, SMA, U1-1-935.
[50] Shanghai Municipal Gazette, 8 April 1920, SMA, U1-1-985; Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1920, SMA, U1-1-933.
[51] Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1925, SMA, U1-1-938.

purchases funded by the SMC.[52] The Corps of 1918 had therefore been armed with a motley collection of weapons, some of which dated back to well before the Boxer Uprising, and with most in a poor state of repair.[53] Alongside an enthusiastic but largely amateur approach, the pre-1919 SVC was little more than a very basic part-time militia.

The mass influx of up to date, if slightly worn, equipment therefore provided a step change in capability. In addition, the attachment of experienced British Army Warrant Officers and many volunteers who had served during the war, contributed to a growing professionalism within the Corps. As concern grew about the situation in China, so did the strength of the SVC as foreign residents were encouraged to play a role in the defence of the International Settlement. Between 1920 and 1927, for example, the number of volunteers increased from 1,345 to 1,887. With better equipment being procured and experienced wartime officers replacing those previously appointed as social favours by the Commandant, morale improved significantly.[54] As a result, attendance also increased from an 'active' participation rate of 73% in 1920 to 86% the following year, peaking at 88% in 1924.[55] By 1927, favourable comparisons were even being drawn between the SVC and Territorial Army battalions back in Britain.[56] The SVC's Light Horse Company, drawn from the city's richer residents, proved to be the exception and retained their nickname as the 'Tight Horse' due to their drinking prowess rather than military abilities.[57] Overall, however, the SVC was becoming increasingly capable of dealing with all but the most extreme crises that might affect Shanghai from 1920 onwards, largely relieving the Navy of one task drawing on its manpower.

[52] Major-General C. Anderson to the Shanghai Municipal Council, 29 May 1913, SMA, U1-2-445.
[53] Major MacKenzie to the Shanghai Municipal Council, 18 April 1902, SMA, U1-2-725; Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1921, SMA, U1-1-934.
[54] Report of the Volunteers Corps Commission in the Shanghai Municipal Gazette, 1 April 1920, SMA, U1-1-985.
[55] Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1920, SMA, U1-1-933; Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1927, SMA, U1-1-940.
[56] Letter from J. Duncan to the Shanghai Municipal Council, 18 March 1927, SMA, U1-1-992.
[57] Interview with I.L. Wight, 1982, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 6196, 12 minutes.

Figure 9: Shanghai Volunteer Corps membership 1920-27[58]

While there were such practical benefits, overall the flow of modern weaponry into China was eroding the perceived strength and novelty value of the Royal Navy's river force. As a result, the British Empire was left with two options if it was to preserve its superpower image in the region. The first option was to strengthen the China Station. With the Treasury looking to cut rather than increase the Admiralty's funding, such a choice would have required redeploying resources from elsewhere. Such shifts in vessels would either result in the abandonment of another post or greater force dispersal, which would go against the core element of Britain's post-Fisher naval grand strategy. Neither was acceptable to the Admiralty. Alternatively, the Royal Navy could make a qualitative improvement to its China force.

Hermes the trickster

Commissioned in 1924, *Hermes* was the world's first purpose-built aircraft carrier and with a complement of relatively new aircraft (Fairey IIID and Fairey Flycatcher), for a very brief period it represented the cutting edge in the rapidly evolving field of naval aviation.[59] The posting of *Hermes* to Asia in August 1925 was therefore highly symbolic, having only recently completed its sea-trials in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. Not only was the

[58] Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Reports 1920-1927, SMA, U1-1-933 to U1-1-940.
[59] David Hobbs, Aircraft Carriers of the Royal and Commonwealth Navies, (London: Greenhill, 1996), p.103; Hezlet, *Aircraft and Sea Power*, p.114.

deployment itself a statement, but on 1 November 1925 three of *Hermes'* aircraft formed a ceremonial escort for the ship delivering Hong Kong's new Governor, Cecil Clementi.[60] The parade was an attempt to impress both the population of Hong Kong and the warships from China, France, Japan, and the USA that were docked in the harbour. The spectacle's impact was undermined, however, when one of the aircraft was caught in turbulence and crashed into the harbour. As a result, the local English-language newspaper, the *China Mail,* reported the accident as front-page news, relegating coverage of Governor Clementi's welcome to page seven.[61] Nonetheless, the intention had been to exploit the aircraft carrier's novelty in order to advertise British power in the region.

Hermes' first tour on the China Station was characterised by daily exercise and training flights over and around Hong Kong, up the Pearl River to Guangzhou, or across to Macau. During those six months there were only two recorded instances where the ship was used in an active military role. Even those were far from dramatic. In the first, an armed guard was simply sent by motor launch to inspect a Chinese steamer.[62] In the second, two aircraft were despatched in vain to find a Dutch cargo vessel, which was suspected of transporting weapons to the Guomindang in contravention of an international arms embargo.[63] The little real drama from the first visit came from formation flying displays, generally watched by crowds of onlookers, some of which were reported by the local press.[64] Articles in the same newspapers a few weeks later suggest that the novelty soon wore off, especially as the regular early morning practice flights over the city were less appreciated by the local population.[65] In contrast, after returning to the China Station in late 1926 *Hermes* was involved in monthly anti-piracy operations in Daya Bay, spending far less time in Hong Kong harbour.[66] Even then *Hermes'* role was as much symbolic as military; during an anti-piracy raid on villages in Daya Bay in March 1927, for example, aircraft were flown overhead in part 'to add to the impression of power'.[67]

[60] Ship's log of HMS *Hermes* 1925-1926, TNA, ADM 53/78829.
[61] *China Mail*, 2 November 1925.
[62] Ship's log of HMS *Hermes* 1925-1926, TNA, ADM 53/78829.
[63] Diary of Captain C. Talbot, 11 October 1925, IWM, Documents.20134.
[64] *Hong Kong Telegraph*, 28 October 1925.
[65] Newspaper cuttings in the diary of Lieutenant William Andrewes, 1926, IWM, DS/MISC/12.
[66] Ship's log of HMS *Hermes* 1926-1927, TNA, ADM 53/78830.
[67] Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower,* p.193.

The sedate nature of *Hermes'* first visit to Hong Kong in late 1925 was aided by the military aircraft in China at that point not yet posing a significant threat to Britain's interests. Only the strongest factions had been able to finance the purchase of aircraft in any quantity, and even then most descended rapidly into a poor state of repair, due to a lack of fully trained mechanics.[68] In July 1925, for example, Consul-General Jamieson had reported to Palairet that most of the Guomindang's aircraft were not in a sufficient state of repair to even reach Hong Kong from Guangzhou, a distance of just over 100 miles.[69] While the direct threat was limited, the contrasting absence of British airpower in East Asia was increasingly felt to be undermining Britain's image as a superpower. This was particularly true of the British colonial communities in the region, with the *China Mail* strongly advocating the need for military aircraft, arguing that they were vital in the competition between major powers for prestige in East Asia.[70] Up until this point the only real display of British military aviation in East Asia had involved the outdated seaplane tender HMS *Pegasus* visiting Hong Kong in November 1924, as part of global tour taking aerial photographs of strategically important harbours.[71]

Hermes' deployment came at a point when military aviation in China was developing rapidly. Immediately after the First World War Britain had largely dominated the flow of aircraft into China. Sales of some of Britain's roughly 10,000 surplus wartime aircraft were made as part of a wider effort to recoup at least part of the estimated £1 billion of military equipment no longer required in peacetime.[72] Dominating the global surplus military aircraft market enabled the British government to influence the number and quality of aircraft sold on to many second-tier powers. To some extent this had ensured that most aircraft in China in 1920 were already outdated compared with those used by the major powers' air forces. That situation did not last long. After signing the multinational treaty embargoing armament sales to China in mid-1919, Britain lost its tentative power of influence. While British arms manufacturers found ways to break the embargo, the French arms industry in particular

[68] Chan, *Arming the Chinese*, pp.117-121.
[69] Jamieson to Palairet, 14 July 1925, TNA, FO 371/10947.
[70] E.g. *China Mail*, 21 August 1925, p.1; *China Mail*, 2 November 1925, p.1.
[71] Monthly reports from Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 1924, TNA, ADM 116/2262; G.L.D. Alderson, *History of RAF Kai Tak*, (Hong Kong: Royal Air Force, 1972), pp.11-12; Cliff Dunnaway, *Wings Over Hong Kong: An Aviation History 1891-1998*, (Hong Kong: Pacific Century Publishers, 1999), pp.12-65.
[72] Chan, *Arming the Chinese*, p.118; Higham, *Armed Forces in Peacetime,* p.19.

exploited the absence of support in Whitehall for aircraft sales to China. Such was the shift to France that by 1923 one of Zhang Zuolin's trusted commanders, Colonel Wei, had been sent to establish an office in Paris purely for ordering new military equipment.[73] As a result, by early 1924 Britain had little influence over the flow of what were often brand new military aircraft being sold to China's warlords.

Concern about the prestige risk presented by growing interest in aerial power in China was exacerbated in mid-1925 when the Soviet Union sent five of its latest aircraft on a diplomatic tour from Moscow to Guangzhou. While technical faults forced two of the five to abandon the tour, the three that completed the journey were reportedly a big hit with Guomindang officials and the local population. Indeed, Hong Kong's two main English language newspapers, the *China Mail* and *Hong Kong Telegraph*, both featured articles in the following weeks arguing that the tour had been a victory for Soviet prestige and influence in the region.[74] This was not the first time another power had completed such a tour. The previous year a flight of four US Army Air Service aircraft visited Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Canton as part of their world record, world tour.[75] The Americans were received warmly at Hong Kong, although it set a stark contrast to the single RAF seaplane that was competing against them for the record. The British competitor arrived three weeks overdue and later crashed off the Japanese coast.[76] While the previous incident was considered bad luck, beaten by an admired friend, there were considerably stronger feelings about the Bolshevik foe having pulled off a propaganda coup in such a sensitive location for Britain. Along with the anti-British boycott, launched after the May Thirtieth Incident, these events around Hong Kong were combining to make the British Empire look weak. As a result, Cabinet were convinced that an effective way to remind the Guomindang and the people of Guangzhou of Britain's power would be to use military aircraft.[77]

The role of military aircraft in China was not intended to be based around their combat effectiveness, but rather the psychological impact of their use. *Hermes'* normal contingent of fifteen Fairey IIID and Fairey Flycatchers only provided a theoretical maximum cumulative

[73] Chan, *Arming the Chinese,* pp.57, 83.
[74] *China Mail*, 21 August 1925; *Hong Kong Telegraph*, 8 September 1925.
[75] Commodore H.E. Grace to Admiral Leveson, 10 June 1924, TNA, ADM 116/2262.
[76] Dunnaway, *Wings Over Hong Kong,* pp.62-65.
[77] Committee of Imperial Defence summary of situation in China for Cabinet, June 1925, TNA, CAB 24/174/26.

bombload of 1,200lbs (544kg) per sortie, which was relatively trifling compared to the ordinary naval firepower available on China's main waterways. During the Nanjing Incident in 1927, for example, HMS *Emerald* alone fired roughly 600kg of ordnance within the first minute.[78] Likewise, a few weeks later HMS *Wanderer* discharged almost 2,000kg of shells at a group of Chinese soldiers near Jiangjiu, during a relatively short engagement.[79] With ranges of between fifteen to twenty kilometres, the main naval guns could also adequately cover the majority of territory immediately surrounding the treaty ports, although with questionable accuracy in areas of rough terrain.

Aircraft did provide the new possibility of punitive raids far inland, but there are no records that such a mission was actively considered. In the event of accidents or aircraft being downed by enemy fire, the RAF pilots might have been left far from help or rescue, particularly given the rules against ground forces being sent into Chinese territory. In authorising the deployment, the Cabinet instead intended *Hermes* to operate in a colonial policing role similar to the RAF's activities in the Middle East, trying to use the fear generated by the novelty of military aircraft to intimidate and emphasise British superiority.[80] Likewise, the presence would have the contrasting effect on the British colonial community in China, by reassuring them that Britain would do what was considered necessary to protect them.

It is unlikely that using military aircraft was a particularly effective means of impressing the Chinese audience, or even had potential to achieve the desired results in boosting British prestige. During the early years of military aviation in China, between 1917 and 1923, aircraft did reportedly instil fear and respect among civilians and troops alike. By the time *Hermes* arrived in the region, however, aircraft had become a common feature in the skylines over eastern China. Most warlords and factions possessed their own embryotic air forces and regularly employed them in dropping leaflets, reconnoitring enemy positions, and bombing targets. The arrival of British aircraft therefore only added to a general normalisation of the Chinese population to the presence of military aircraft. Not only that, but after the initial employment of aircraft the morale impact of bombing and strafing

[78] Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book.
[79] Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-1928, NMM, HTN 214.
[80] Priya Satia, 'The Defense of Inhumanity: Air Control and the British Idea of Arabia', *American Historical Review* 111/1 (2006), 16-51; Killingray, 'A Swift Agent of Government', 429-444.

attacks tended to decline rapidly, a fact evident from the experience of air policing elsewhere in the Empire.[81]

While ostensibly *Hermes'* tour may have been intended to boost British prestige in China, the Admiralty had an additional, nominally secret motive. During the tour, Fleet Air Arm and RAF personnel carried by *Hermes* spent a significant amount of time ashore while in Hong Kong, establishing military facilities at Kai Tak (Kai Teck) airstrip, Kowloon.[82] Founded only the previous year, Kai Tak was a quiet airstrip on newly reclaimed land in Kowloon Bay, suitable for both land-based aircraft and seaplanes.[83] The initially basic facilities established there were gradually expanded with Kai Tak later becoming an official RAF airfield, although it also remained Hong Kong's main international airport right through until its closure in 1998.[84] Under the terms of the Washington Treaty, Britain had agreed to maintain the 'status quo' in regards to its military facilities at Hong Kong, theoretically but not explicitly banning the creation of a military airfield.[85] The clause was one that the Admiralty had been very reluctant to agree to, regarding it as a dangerous concession, but one they had agreed to in order to secure the overall treaty.[86] Britain had not been willing to sacrifice existing naval bases during negotiations, but suspending upgrades to Hong Kong and Weihai were considered acceptable losses to secure Japan's agreement not to seek a harbour south of Taiwan (Formosa).[87] At the time of *Hermes'* tour in 1925 the British government still wanted to avoid being seen to break the treaty, as it would have provided Japan and the USA with cause to revoke it, potentially threatening Britain's global defence strategy.[88]

Adapting the facilities at Kowloon's civilian airstrip under the guise that it was a 'temporary landing ground' for *Hermes'* aircraft may not have been within the spirit of the Washington Treaty, but in Britain's view it was not a clear violation.[89] In 1923, for example, the Admiralty

[81] Killingray, 'A Swift Agent of Government', 437.
[82] Ship's log of HMS *Hermes* 1925-1926, TNA, ADM 53/78829.
[83] Alderson, *History of RAF Kai Tak,* p.13.
[84] Ray Sturtivant, *British Naval Aviation: The Fleet Air Arm, 1917-1990*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1990), p.14.
[85] Jordan, *Warships after Washington,* Appendix 1: Washington Treaty 1922: Chapter 1: Article XIX.
[86] Philips P. O'Brien, *British and American Naval Power: Politics and Policy 1900-1936*, (Westport: Praeger, 1998), p.173.
[87] Tadashi Kuramatsu, 'Britain, Japan and Inter-War Naval Limitation, 1921-1936', in *The history of Anglo-Japanese relations, 1600-2000; Volume III: The Military Dimension*, ed. by Ian Gow, Yoichi Hirama, John Chapman, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 127-138.
[88] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.65.
[89] Diary of Captain C. Talbot, June 1924 to April 1926.

advised its senior commanders that storing military aircraft supplies at Hong Kong would not contravene the Washington Treaty, so long as the equipment was transported by an aircraft carrier.[90] As aircraft-carrier landings were still extremely hazardous, both on deck and using floats, it was not an outrageous argument by Britain that such land-based facilities would be installed on a temporary basis for pilot safety. Hezlet argues that one in four carrier landings in the early 1920s resulted in damage to the aircraft, with one in twelve leading to the aircraft being written-off.[91] Certainly during his time as Executive Officer aboard HMS *Hermes* during 1926, Commander Reginald Ramsbotham remembered aircraft regularly being written off from rough landings, although most aircrew escaped with minor injuries.[92] Such attrition rates were unsustainable and difficult to justify in peacetime. While an airstrip was indeed safer for the pilots it also removed the need for the Fairey IIIDs to use floats and allowed them to carry more fuel, both of which increased the aircraft's potential range.[93]

Despite the safety argument, the discussion around the 1923 War Orders provided by the Admiralty suggests that the decision to establish ground-based facilities was actually, primarily intended to strengthen Hong Kong against a potential Japanese attack. A military airfield would also have additional value in strengthening Britain's position in relation to China. Should war with either of the two Asian powers have appeared likely, RAF squadrons could be quickly despatched to Hong Kong with the required front-line stores, facilities, and equipment ready for their arrival. Upon departure from Malta, *Hermes* had picked up sixteen spare aircraft and as many RAF supplies as the ship could carry, which were unloaded soon after arrival in Hong Kong.[94] When *Hermes* later went to make its departure from the China Station, its commander Captain Cecil Talbot recorded: 'We have left a few aircraft, and most of the RAF personnel, at Hong Kong.'[95] As a result, a study in early 1928 stated that in the event of war, Kai Tak was sufficiently prepared as a semi-military airfield that it could support three squadrons (c.50-70 aircraft) at short notice.[96] As the aircraft

[90] Appendix C, 'War Standing Instructions for the Guidance of Commander-in-Chief Abroad and Senior Officers in Command of Foreign Stations', January 1923, TNA, ADM 116/3124.
[91] Hezlet, *Aircraft and Sea Power,* p.113.
[92] Unpublished memoirs of Captain Ramsbotham, (1968), IWM.
[93] Memoranda discussing the operation of aircraft from aircraft carriers, 1925-1926, TNA, AIR 5/387.
[94] Diary of Captain C. Talbot, July-August 1925.
[95] Diary of Captain C. Talbot, 14 October 1925.
[96] Admiral Tyrwhitt to Admiralty, 11 January 1928, TNA, ADM 116/3126.

already available in the region aboard HMS *Hermes* provided Britain with sufficient air power to deter attacks from the Guomindang, the scale of the preparations further suggests that Kai Tak's development was quietly directed against the perceived threat from Japan.

By 1927, Britain stretched the terms of the Washington Treaty further by permanently stationing one flight of six fighter aircraft at Hong Kong's airfield. As the aircraft were transported to China by an aircraft carrier and on detachment from the Fleet Air Arm, they were publicly presented as a temporary defensive measure related to events in China.[97] This was officially discussed and authorised by the Chiefs of Staff, who were recorded as stating: 'We have never admitted that the use of (Kai Tak) is prohibited in so far as operations against the Chinese are concerned, by the Washington Agreement'.[98] A further disclaimer was made that the military aircraft sent to Shanghai were also not seen as restricted by the treaty, under Britain's interpretation, given that the city was neither official British territory nor a military base.

The first RAF flight appointed to the Far East then took yet another step in bending the terms of the Washington Treaty. While permanently based at Singapore, the four Supermarine Southampton flying boats did spend time working out of Hong Kong. As the flying boats did not require the use of Kai Tak's runway, they enabled the continued pretence that the airfield was only a civilian enterprise. It was only finally in January 1930 that the RAF officially put in place a command structure recognising the existence of a Far East Command, including a presence in Hong Kong.[99] Curiously, after a decade of trying to avoid breaking the Washington Treaty, the creation of the Far East Command occurred three weeks before the opening of the London Naval Conference, and six years before the expiration of the original agreement. It seems likely that by that point Britain was sufficiently confident that restrictions on base enhancements in the region would be rescinded. Signed in April, amid a range of negotiated compromises, the Admiralty got their way and the limitations on air power at Hong Kong were lifted.[100]

[97] RAF Intelligence Report on China, 1927, TNA, AIR 5/865.
[98] Chiefs of Staff report on the defence of Shameen, 18 January 1927, TNA, CAB 24/184/16.
[99] Alderson, *History of RAF Kai Tak,* pp.14-15.
[100] Jordan, *Warships after Washington,* Appendix 2: London Treaty 1930; O'Brien, 'The Washington Treaty Era', 504-506.

Throughout the process of developing Kai Tak as a military airfield at Hong Kong, the Admiralty does not appear to have formally consulted Cabinet. As an operational matter, which the Admiralty argued did not breach Britain's international treaty commitments, there was no requirement to seek political approval. In the June 1925 correspondence with Cabinet about *Hermes*' deployment, the Navy referred to using an improvised landing ground at Happy Valley racecourse in Hong Kong to land its Fairey Flycatcher fighters, with no mention of Kai Tak.[101] When *Hermes* departed Portsmouth on 17 June, however, it was already loaded with additional aircraft equipment to be delivered to Kai Tak.[102] The omission is therefore highly suggestive that the Admiralty used the situation in China to quietly facilitate the controversial development.

This hypothesis is supported by Marshal of the Royal Air Force Hugh Trenchard when he proposed exactly the same plan during a Cabinet discussion in November 1926, after *Hermes* had already returned from delivering its first load of aircraft equipment to Hong Kong. Trenchard apparently had no knowledge of what had already happened at Kai Tak, and was advised by Foreign Secretary Sir Austen Chamberlain that such a move would put the Washington Treaty at risk. [103] Likewise, at the end of *Hermes'* first deployment, the Colonial Office lobbied the Navy to remove the equipment from Kai Tak, when it became clear it would be left behind when the warship was due to depart China. Talbot's diary indicates that an initial response from an unnamed individual at the Admiralty agreed with the Colonial Office that the Washington Treaty was risk, but all opposition was dropped quite suddenly after senior command became involved.[104] Alternatively, it is plausible that successive British governments avoided officially recognising the plans, to help maintain the pretence that the Navy was only temporarily using what was otherwise a civilian airfield. In either case, the choice of *Hermes* to conduct the subterfuge, named after the trickster god of Greek mythology, seems particularly appropriate.

Such hidden motives raise the question whether the Royal Navy by the 1920s really believed that displays of naval technology were effective at boosting British Imperial prestige. Certainly, image appears to have been an important factor under consideration. During

[101] Committee of Imperial Defence summary of situation in China for Cabinet, June 1925, TNA, CAB 24/174/26.
[102] Ship's log of HMS *Hermes* 1925-1926, TNA, ADM 53/78829.
[103] Cabinet discussion on piracy in Bias Bay, 15 November 1925, TNA, CAB 2/4/218.
[104] Diary of Captain C. Talbot, June 1924 to April 1926.

Seaman Albert Heron's time aboard HMS *Carlisle* from 1919 to 1921 for example, 'much, much more attention' was paid to the cruiser's appearance than was normal on other stations, in order to make a strong impression when visiting Chinese ports.[105] A similar account from Seaman Thomas Wallace, stationed in China aboard HMS *Vengeance* between 1907 and 1908, indicates that this was a long term trait of the China Station.[106] Indeed, warships on the China Station were painted white, in contrast to the standard grey used worldwide by the Royal Navy. That distinctive colour scheme ensured that the vessels stood out from their peers, which is clear from contemporary photographs.[107] The disappearance by the 1920s of outright statements in official naval communications emphasising the need for flag waving, however, would suggest that imperial prestige carried less weight after the First World War than it had done previously. Indeed, even in debate at the House of Commons there were only infrequent references to flying the flag in China in the early 1920s, such as Gershom Stewart MP suggesting it would help at the smaller concessions to 'reassure those of our people there'.[108] Was *Hermes'* deployment to China in 1925 therefore actually more to do with preparing the facilities at Kai Tak rather than impressing the Chinese population?

The lack of even a brief visit to Shanghai or Guangzhou by the carrier on its first tour, obvious choices if the intention was to spread word of British aerial prowess in China, supports the idea that *Hermes'* deployment was not primarily to boost imperial prestige. Likewise, during its time in Hong Kong only four official receptions for foreign naval officers were held, two from the USN and two from the French Navy.[109] *Hermes'* captain was not going to great lengths to show-off his new ship, particularly when compared with its time in the Mediterranean on route to China. The vague statement made to the House of Commons by Bridgeman is not particularly convincing either, referring to *Hermes* being sent for 'training and exercising the Fleet Air Arm' and possibly assisting in defending British interests in China.[110] Training could easily be done in the Mediterranean at a lower cost than

[105] Interview with A.A. Heron, 1975, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 681, Reel 11, 3-4 minutes.
[106] Interview with T. Wallace, 1976, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 731, Reel 4, 9 minutes.
[107] E.g. Photograph album of M.S. Spalding (RN), 1927, Brotherton Library, LIDDLE/WW1/RNMN/272; Photograph collection of C.E. Winslow (USN), 1927, Naval History and Heritage Command, NH105067, www.history.navy.mil/our-collections (last accessed 8 January 2018).
[108] Hansard, 2 July 1923, vol.166 c.19.
[109] Ship's log of HMS *Hermes* 1925-1926, TNA, ADM 53/78829.
[110] *China Mail*, 7 August 1925.

making the trip to Hong Kong, and the quiet stationing of *Hermes* in Hong Kong harbour for almost the entire tour did little to support the second stated aim. Hong Kong was rocked during that period by major strikes after the May Thirtieth Incident, but the city had survived previous strikes and the main anti-British protests, and resulting violence, occurred at Shanghai and Guangzhou.[111] Investigating the impact of the local climate on flying conditions or testing the suitability of landing sites might have supported a deployment to China, but neither factor was mentioned in the correspondence. It seems likely, therefore, that the while strengthening imperial prestige was a factor in and provided the opportunity for *Hermes'* first deployment, the primary motive behind the Admiralty's decision was the establishment of military airfield facilities at Hong Kong.

With the Royal Navy's standing in East Asia under pressure from the growing power of both its international rivals and by China itself, in addition to the Admiralty's diminishing interest in overtly displaying its power, the China Station was in a precarious situation. For most of the 1920s, however, even if the superpower image of the Royal Navy was waning, the service was still regarded with wariness and respect by China's leaders and population. No warlord or faction officially challenged Britain militarily during the 1920s, although during the 1927 crisis there was some willingness by the Guomindang to allow minor clashes between its troops and British warships, even if only through passive acquiescence. For the most part, however, the Royal Navy's experience was that seen during the Nanjing Incident when all of HMS *Emerald's* officers reported that neither southern nor northern troops deliberately fired at the ship.[112] The only casualty aboard *Emerald*, Able Seaman John Knox, was hit in the head by a stray bullet when fighting first erupted between the rival Chinese troops, and before Captain England ordered his men down from exposed positions. It is therefore difficult to attribute the growing number of incidents where naval vessels were fired upon by Chinese troops to a shift in respect afforded to the Royal Navy, or diminishing fears of potential retribution, particularly as the USN was exposed to the same trend.[113] The increase in violence was instead a result of the growing sense of nationalism in China, and crucially - the greater availability of modern weaponry.

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[111] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* pp.38-53; Osterhammel, 'China', p.650.
[112] Letter from Captain England to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 29 March 1927, 'Papers relating to the Nanking Incident of March 24 and 25 1927', (London, 1927); Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book.
[113] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* p.107.

This is supported by the ground-level interactions involving British servicemen in China. Seaman Arthur Gaskin remembered that during the troubles at Hankou in January 1927, Chinese protestors generally preferred toying with British sailors and marines by trying to knock their steel helmets off using bamboo poles.[114] His opinion was that while Chinese protestors were boisterous and occasionally mischievous, they did not look to start fights with groups of foreign servicemen. Gaskin did note, that lone foreigners were at greater risk of beatings during tense protests, recounting how a Royal Marine patrol rescued a badly injured German doctor who had tried pushing through the crowd. The local American newspaper, the *Hankow Herald,* provides a slightly more dramatic account of the bamboo pole swinging antics, stating that two sailors were deliberately knocked unconscious during the course of events.[115] However, the weight of first-hand accounts tend to agree with Gaskin's core views on interactions with Chinese civilians. Both Lieutenant Ian Wight and Private Ernest Whitney, for example, felt the Chinese were generally friendly with or at least respectful of British servicemen, when they were posted to Shanghai and Guangzhou respectively in 1927.[116]

So overall, while new technology was used at times in an attempt to reinforce British prestige in East Asia, those efforts had become a secondary aim targeted at re-assuring the British colonial population in the region. The Admiralty does indeed appear to have placed less value on waving the flag, in line with the general post-Fisher shift in strategy away from gunboat diplomacy. Crucially, however, any decline in the Royal Navy's perceived power in China did not significantly alter the events on the ground. Chinese troops and bandits were increasingly capable of engaging foreign forces, but even the worst clashes did not show any serious intent to challenge Britain militarily. The Royal Navy's use of technology was overwhelmingly focused upon the practical requirements of defending the British Empire, rather than reinforcing how it was seen by the Chinese.

[114] Interview with A. Gaskin, 1986, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 9344, Reel 6, 1-7 minutes.
[115] Undated extract from the *Hankow Herald* included in report by Rear-Admiral Tillard, 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[116] Interview with E.C. Whitney, 1992, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 12499, 21-28 minutes.

Understanding China

Communications technology played a key role in influencing how the British Empire was organised and controlled, particularly in relation to the Royal Navy. As late as the mid-nineteenth century the reliance on ship-borne mail as the main long-distance means of conveying information and ideas had resulted in significant discretionary power being placed with local officials and commanders. [117] For Britain's outposts in East Asia that situation only started to change after the first telegraph cable was laid to Hong Kong in June 1871, transforming London's ability to understand what was going on in the region.[118] Andrew Lambert argues that in the following two decades the British government started to exploit this comparatively rapid form of communication as a means of actively influencing events as they happened, at the furthest reaches of the British Empire.[119] Sending messages around the world with those early cables may still have taken hours, and often required re-sending as a result of being garbled by poor quality transmission, but that was a huge leap forward from postal communication.[120] For the most part, however, the interpretation of events and subsequent formation and implementation of policy, was still left to the China Station's Commander in Chief, in conjunction with his Foreign Office counterparts in Hong Kong and Beijing. Likewise, communication at the base of the Navy's command chain remained reliant on intermittent letters between ship and shore. It could therefore take weeks for orders to be distributed to all China Station vessels, or longer when the Commander in Chief was out on tour with his squadron. This could lead to policy being further diluted, as decision-making authority passed by default to officers lower down the scale.

Correspondence between Vice Admiral Arthur Moore, commanding the China Station in 1907, and the Admiralty provides a peacetime example of how communication prior to the First World impacted on policy. On 28 July 1906 Lieutenant Commander George Todd, commanding the gunboats on the upper Yangtze, held a banquet at Leshan (Kiating) on his own initiative to promote better relations with the local Chinese officials. Using his own

[117] Anthony Wells, 'Naval Intelligence and decision making in an era of technical change', in *Technical Change and British Naval Policy 1860-1939*, ed. by Bryan Ranft (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p.123.
[118] *New York Times*, 25 July 1871.
[119] Lambert, 'Strategic Command and Control', 363.
[120] Glen O'Hara, ''The Sea is Swinging into View': Modern British Maritime History in a Globalised World' *English Historical Review* 125/510 (2009), 1114.

money, Todd had spent thirteen dollars and two cents on 'wines and liqueres' (sic), five dollars and sixty-two cents on food, and fifty cents on cigarettes. [121] While not an exceptional amount, if such banquets were held regularly the cost would soon add-up for such junior officers. It was not until 12 January 1907 that Vice Admiral Moore, Commander in Chief of the China Station, received and was subsequently able to forward the report and associated expense request for the feast to the Admiralty.[122] A further two months lapsed before the Admiralty's answer was dispatched in March, stating that such banquets were not official Navy policy and so the cost would have to be met by the officers involved.[123] Moore responded with a passionate letter in April arguing that promoting warm relations with Chinese officials could provide Britain with 'a great deal of advantage'. In addition, Moore made particular reference to growing competition from other nations for trade in China while justifying the expense.[124] Perhaps feeling that he had overstepped his authority, Moore retracted his letter a week later with a statement that the order had been distributed to his officers that no official banquets or gifts were to be exchanged with Chinese officials.[125]

Making the assumption that there was a comparable further delay in Moore's order reaching the upper Yangtze, it had taken the Navy almost a year to clarify what authority junior officers had in exercising soft power in China. By that point, Todd had already been notified of his next command and his imminent departure from the Yangtze. The process could have been expedited during a crisis, by using dedicated despatch vessels for example, but this example illustrates how Whitehall only had a distant and delayed ability to influence events on the ground.

Slow communications could have far greater consequences than matters of soft diplomacy, with junior officers sometimes facing the burden of decisions that could significantly impact upon Britain's relationship with China. This was true of the Navy worldwide, but was particularly pronounced in a command like the China Station where smaller warships often

[121] Memorandum and expense form submitted by Lieutenant-Commander G.J. Todd 28 July 1906, TNA, ADM 125/127.
[122] Report from Vice-Admiral Moore to Admiralty 12 January 1907, TNA, ADM, 125/127.
[123] Memorandum from Admiralty to Vice-Admiral Moore 7 March 1907, TNA, ADM 125/127.
[124] Letter from Vice-Admiral Moore to Admiralty 18 April 1907, TNA, ADM 125/127.
[125] Memorandum from Moore to Admiralty 25 April 1907, TNA 125/127.

operated in comparatively remote locations.[126] In early 1907, for example, when a British steamer was seized by the Guangzhou authorities in relation to the death of a Chinese passenger, a young Lieutenant Commander in charge of the gunboats on the West River ordered twenty-seven-year-old Lieutenant, Gerald Dickens, to take his destroyer HMS *Hart* and recover the vessel.[127] His orders were to negotiate a peaceful release with the Chinese government officials, but if necessary to use force. Looking back on the events, Dickens later wrote in his memoirs that he felt it was amazing that such responsibility was left to junior officers who were not required, or indeed able, to get authorisation from the Commodore at Hong Kong, but that the situation was quite normal before wireless sets became commonly available. In this case, Dickens convinced the Chinese officials that it would be better for everyone if the gunboats detaining the steamer were withdrawn, but the peaceful outcome relied heavily upon the amicable relationship between him and his Chinese counterpart.

Had the Chinese authorities refused Dickens' proposal, a small flotilla of British destroyers was being prepared nearby to engage the three Chinese gunboats and 'cut-out' the steamer, much in the style of what was attempted during the 1926 Wanxian Incident. A potential battle between the two nations' warships, and the diplomatic crisis that it would have produced, was only avoided through a negotiation conducted on the British side by an officer with just one year's experience in sole command. Effective wireless equipment therefore offered the opportunity to accelerate the flow of information and orders along the chain of command, putting many decisions of similar importance in the hands of senior officers.

Wireless sets were first introduced by the Royal Navy around 1900, but it was not until shortly before the First World War that new advances really made them into effective tools.[128] Those sets available in 1904, for example, were capable of transmitting merely fifty miles in daytime, which was of limited value across the expanses of the China Station.[129]

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[126] Jones, 'Towards a Hierarchy of Management', p.160.
[127] Unpublished autobiography of G.C. Dickens, undated, KCLMA, Catalogue ID 1114, Chapter two.
[128] Norman Friedman, 'Electronics and Navies', in *The Eclipse of the Big Gun*, ed. by Robert Gardiner (London: Conway Maritime, 1992), p.192.
[129] John W.M. Chapman, 'Britain, Japan and the 'Higher Realms of Intelligence', 1900-1918', in *The history of Anglo-Japanese relations, 1600-2000; Volume III: The Military Dimension*, ed. by Ian Gow, Yoichi Hirama, and John Chapman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.77.

Even as wireless technology improved, the limited funding available to purchase sets and difficulties in finding sufficient space to house the equipment on smaller vessels meant that it was only during the First World War that most naval vessels had radios installed.[130] As an outlying outpost that was not integral to the Royal Navy's grand strategy, the China Station was a low priority for receiving those sets that were available. Indeed, in 1913 both Vice Admiral Martyn Jerram and Captain Frederick Powlett had bemoaned in letters to the Admiralty how the Royal Navy's effectiveness on the Chinese coast was hampered by delays in issuing wireless sets.[131] The planned issuing of wireless sets however, which the two officers were attempting to expedite, was subsequently cancelled due to the outbreak of war in Europe. Wireless sets therefore only appeared on the China Station in any numbers when relatively new, wartime-built vessels were sent out to East Asia in 1919. Crucially, most river gunboats still had to wait for older sets to be cascaded down to them, a process completed in 1924.[132]

One early incident in China where the value of wireless sets can be clearly seen, was during warlord fighting around Beijing in late 1923. The telegraph lines out of Beijing had been severed during the violence, removing the normal means of communication with the outside world used by the various international consulates within the city. As a result, the wireless link between the British consulate and a Royal Navy warship at Tianjin became the sole quick and effective means Britain had for communicating with the legation. While the situation in Beijing was felt to be sufficiently calm not to require a Royal Navy taskforce to be based at Tianjin, it was still tense enough to require a rapid means of requesting help should the situation take a turn for the worse. After hearing of the Great Kanto earthquake in Japan and the devastation it had caused, Admiral Leveson sent as many vessels to assist as possible, with two cruisers, a sloop, and two support vessels despatched immediately, all laden with supplies and medical personnel.[133] Leveson also wanted the sloop HMS *Foxglove* to join the humanitarian mission, but it was delayed while waiting for HMS *Bluebell* to take over its duties maintaining a link in the radio chain to the diplomatic mission in Beijing.

[130] Lambert, 'Strategic Command and Control', 373.
[131] Correspondence between Jerram, Powlett, and the Admiralty, 1913, TNA, ADM 1/8376/109.
[132] Commodore A.J.B. Stirling to Admiral Leveson, 10 April 1924, TNA, 116/2262; Speech by Rear-Admiral Anderson to the Shanghai Branch of the China Association, 11 August 1924, SOAS Special Collections, CHAS/MCP/30.
[133] Report from Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 11 October 1923, TNA, 1/8665/142.

Without the newly installed radio sets on the China Station's sloops, Leveson would have had no choice but to hold one of his valuable cruisers off the northern Chinese coast, reducing his force's ability to provide assistance in Japan. Had there been no wireless sets available on the China Station at all, as was the situation just ten years beforehand, then given the violence around Beijing it is unlikely Leveson would have felt comfortable despatching any significant vessels to assist in Japan. Radio enabled the China Station to monitor events around China, without having to post forces sufficient to deal with possible, but not necessarily probable, adverse scenarios.

Sometimes the influence wireless had on the China Station's force disposition was less obvious. Prior to the First World War, for example, one light cruiser and two sloops were normally based on the Yangtze in order to afford rapid support the resident gunboats.[134] When tracing through the ship's logs for the cruisers on the China Station in the early 1920s, it is evident that visits to the Yangtze had become relatively rare, consisting of infrequent stops at Shanghai, Nanjing, and occasionally Hankou. The cruisers spent most of their time docked or training at Hong Kong or Weihai, or making diplomatic tours of the wider region, as can be seen with the example of HMS *Carlisle* below (see Figure 10). At times of crisis, however, the cruisers could still be summoned by radio. During an attack by Wu Peifu's troops near Qinhuangdao in late October 1924, for example, the cruisers HMS *Despatch* and HMS *Durban* along with the sloop HMS *Foxglove* were assembled from around the region with additional marines from HMS *Hawkins* and HMS *Diomede.* The force was issued with orders to land at the city if required to maintain order.[135] As it became clear that the fighting would not affect the city, the naval force was soon reduced and normality was resumed by 17 December, with the cruisers docked back at their berths in Hong Kong and Weihai.[136]

[134] Memorandum from Vice-Admiral Jerram to Admiralty, 23 September 1913, TNA, ADM 1/8376/109.
[135] Report from Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 10 November 1924, TNA, ADM 116/2262.
[136] Report from Admiral Edwyn Alexander-Sinclair to Admiralty, 17 December 1924, TNA, ADM 116/2262.

Figure 10: Movements of the cruiser HMS *Carlisle* 1920-23[137]

As conflicts came and went around China during the decade, the Royal Navy's wireless links became increasingly important for the wider British establishment. The Foreign Office's Consul at Chongqing, R.S. Pratt, reported in January 1927 that he was almost wholly reliant upon the news stream from the Navy's gunboats on the upper Yangtze.[138] With the telegraph network frequently disrupted through changes in frontier, the normal alternative was to wait for mail and newspaper deliveries by ship. Postal services could take weeks to travel that far up-river and bundles were occasionally lost.[139] Reliability of ground communication was not just a practical issue. Even when the cables were operational, cases were seen at Hankou where press telegrams had been altered either before or during transmission.[140] Instead the Navy's wireless transmissions kept the vessels, and the ports they were posted to, updated with the latest news. During January 1927, for example, Midshipman Philip Burnett recorded day by day the forces being despatched to China, while stationed aboard HMS *Emerald* at Nanjing.[141] Burnett was even able to note the exact units being assembled in Britain within days of those units receiving their orders, such as the 12th Royal Marine Battalion. The enthusiasm with which Burnett recorded the news provides

[137] Courtesy of Journey Plotter and Naval-History.net, https://www.journeyplotter.nl/index.html, last accessed 10 May 2018.
[138] R.S. Pratt to Admiral Leveson, 18 January 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[139] Letters from Commander Berryman to his mother, August and September 1926, IWM, Documents.1445.
[140] Rear-Admiral Anderson to Admiralty, 14 January 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8712/154.
[141] Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book; War Diary of the 12th Royal Marine Battalion, 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8709/102.

some indication of the morale boost provided from hearing so quickly that reinforcements were on their way.

The greater flow of naval messages around the Station did not always have a positive impact upon the recipients. While at Weihai, Lieutenant William Andrewes serving as Torpedo Officer aboard HMS *Ambrose* noted a growing sense of unease and concern in June 1925 after the May Thirtieth Incident, as the ship recorded messages about clashes around China. This came to a climax on 24 June after overhearing reports from Guangzhou about the shootings on Shamian Island the preceding day. Andrewes wrote that he was very unsettled by reports of foreign women and children being hastily evacuated from Guangzhou and so spent his free time that evening at Weihai's club reading newspaper reports about the situation in China. Perhaps a statement about the questionable accuracy of the *North China Herald* in particular, Andrewes returned to his quarters that evening feeling no more certain or comfortable about what was behind the events.[142]

The desire to gain insights into both what was happening around China, and the causes behind those events, was even greater on an institutional level than the personal curiosities of Lieutenant Andrewes, Midshipman Burnett, or their colleagues. The Navy had long made use of human intelligence to achieve those aims, but the arrival of radios provided the first opportunity to exploit signals intelligence. Adopting a policy of actively intercepting foreign warships' transmissions provided a new external source of information. While primarily intended to improve Britain's knowledge of other countries' naval codes and radio techniques, particularly Japan's, the messages also included valuable news and indications of the policy plans of other powers.[143] Instructions from an American Admiral to the warships of the Asiatic Fleet, in the aftermath of two USN destroyers being hit by artillery fire on the Yangtze, for example, were intercepted and then circulated by the Royal Navy ships at Hong Kong on April 26 1927. The result was that when HMS *Wanderer* sailed upriver a few days later, it was fully prepared for a fight, allowing it to respond immediately when similarly fired upon by Guomindang troops near Jiangyin.[144]

[142] Journal of Lieutenant William Andrewes, 1925-1926, IWM, DS/MISC/12.
[143] Interview with H.C. Claxton, 1990, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 11945, Reel 7, 26 minutes.
[144] Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-1928, NMM, HTN 214.

Gathering secret intelligence from wireless signals extended an existing policy of intercepting and decrypting telegrams. British ownership of the main long-distance telegraph cables had long provided secret insights into other nations' plans.[145] Nor was it just naval communications that the Royal Navy targeted, as diplomatic communications were generally poorly encrypted in the early interwar period. As a result, they became a popular target for intelligence services the world over, including Britain's.[146] In contrast to telegraph intercepts, however, wireless intercepts came with a reliability problem, as some transmissions were only partially intercepted or were difficult to decipher. This appears to have been a particular problem with Chinese communications, given British naval telegraphers' inexperience in dealing with Chinese codes and transmission techniques. In one such example, two-thirds of a message from Guomindang officials in Nanjing to the Yunnan Provisional government detailing the movements of the 38th Army was either missed or unreadable.[147] The delays involved in sending complicated signals back to the Government Code and Cypher School, and deciphered copies back to the China Station, also reduced the tactical value of time-sensitive intelligence.[148] Despite those limitations, radio intercepts did provide a valuable new supply of snippets of information to better inform decisions made by the Royal Navy.

While success in intercepting Chinese messages was decidedly mixed, Britain had less trouble with Japanese transmissions. In part this was due to the weakness of Japanese diplomatic encryption, linked with a habit of repeating messages to all of its consuls in China and many overseas embassies. For example, in the aftermath of the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925 the Japanese Foreign Minister sent instructions to all his consuls in China updating them on Japan's official stance towards relations with Britain. While the original transmissions were missed by the Royal Navy, the British authorities were able to intercept and decrypt the message when it was forwarded to the Japanese ambassador in London. As a result, the British government were aware that the Japanese government believed its own citizens in China were trying to stoke anti-British sentiment, but did not approve of that

[145] Headrick and Griset, 'Submarine Telegraph Cables', 545.
[146] Christopher Andrew, 'The British Secret Service and Anglo-Soviet Relations in the 1920s Part I: From the Trade Negotiations to the Zinoviev Letter', *Historical Journal* 20/3 (1977), 682-683.
[147] Intercepted transmission between Nanjing and Chairman Hu of Yunnan Provincial Government, 31 July 1927, TNA, HW 12/98.
[148] Chapman, 'Britain, Japan and the 'Higher Realms of Intelligence'', p.157.

behaviour.[149] Such reports added weight to the pre-1927 assessment that the Japanese government would not seek a war with Britain, but there was a growing risk the two powers could be driven to war due to Japan's aggressive commercial expansion in China.[150] This was not helped by a relatively rapid shift in Royal Navy officers' attitudes towards Japan and the Japanese in the mid-1920s, from patronising and dismissive, based on a background of racial prejudice, to outright distrustful.[151]

Wireless equipment also sometimes resulted in unexpected developments, which included the creation of a new role for the *L*-class submarine flotilla. In the years after their first deployment to China in 1920, those submarines had generally been employed on regular training exercises. Their primary purpose as a deterrent targeted towards Japan, came with few peacetime responsibilities. The Navy generally avoided leaving the submarines in China's mercantile ports, as the boats themselves had too few crew to provide effective shore parties, except when deployed en masse as a flotilla. Submarines were also extremely vulnerable to being sunk through collisions with merchant vessels. One unfortunate submarine suffered that fate in June 1931, when HMS *Poseidon* was accidentally rammed and sunk by the Chinese merchant ship SS *Yuta* off Weihai.[152] The occasional exceptions to that mundane, if dangerous, routine usually resulted from the vessel's possession of a wireless set.

The radio sets aboard the L-class submarines had a potential range of up to 1,000 miles, although in practice reliability was poor when used over such long distances.[153] That enabled a submarine stationed at Qinhuangdao for much of 1924, for example, to act as a link in a wireless chain used for monitoring unrest in the region, in a similar fashion to the previously mentioned case involving HMS *Foxglove*.[154] With twelve submarines available on the station, one could be regularly spared for relay duties without having a noticeable impact on the flotilla's day-to-day operations. The Royal Navy's efforts to maintain order at the various treaty ports in 1927, however, provided an additional new opportunity for

[149] Japanese Foreign Minister Tokyo to various embassies and consulates, 17 June 1925, TNA, HW 12/71.
[150] Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 24 April 1924, TNA, ADM 116/3124.
[151] Lecture by Director of Naval Intelligence Captain G.C. Dickens at Greenwich War College entitled 'Japan and Sea Power', 15 May 1935, KCLMA, Catalogue ID 1114.
[152] *China Mail*, 10 June 1931, p.1.
[153] Report from Captain Brodie to Commander in Chief China, 21 January 1924, TNA, ADM 116/2262.
[154] Report from HMS *Titania* to Commander in Chief China, 20 October 1924, TNA, ADM 116/2262.

meaningful peacetime employment of the submarines. The months of crisis placed high demands on the China Station's surface vessels, with the force spread thinly around China's many ports that contained British civilians. As a result, the warships were largely unavailable for sustained anti-piracy operations. With piracy still plaguing areas such as Daya Bay, the Navy remained under significant pressure to deal with the threat to British shipping. The Admiralty's defence for its approach towards Daya Bay in particular, was the argument that at least three vessels would be required to patrol that expanse of water alone and such a deployment was unlikely to prove effective enough to justify the cost.[155]

On 28 October 1927 Commodore John Pearson, the Senior Naval Officer at Hong Kong, outlined a new plan to solve the problem, although the core proposal was most likely drawn up by Commander Allan Poland of the submarine tender HMS *Ambrose*.[156] Citing ad-hoc deployments dating back to 1923, Pearson instigated the maintenance of permanent submarine patrols around Daya Bay at night searching for suspect vessels. If a ship failed to respond to hailing and the firing of a blank shell, the submarine could radio for assistance, while remaining at a safe distance to avoid potentially being rammed and sunk. Should the ship attempt to flee, the submarine was to use its deck gun to target the engine room and prevent an escape. Surface vessels would therefore remain on-watch at Hong Kong and Guangzhou, for example, but when requested could attempt to seize pirated vessels only a few hours sailing away. The submarine commanders also felt that such a role would provide valuable training and experience for their crews, given the similarities between the work and wartime commerce raiding.[157]

While the strategy was generally sound, things did not always go so smoothly in practice, as submarine *L4* and its commander Lieutenant Frederick Halahan discovered on 20 October 1927. After challenging the SS *Irene*, the pirates that were in control of the vessel decided to take pot-shots at the submarine with their small-arms. Halahan promptly returned fire with the submarine's 4" deck gun, which killed most of the pirates, but also set fire to the *Irene*. While the *Irene's* 234 crew and passengers were freed, the ship and most of its cargo

[155] Minutes of Committee for Overseas Defence meeting about piracy in China, June 1926, TNA, CAB 24/181/72.
[156] Orders compiled by Commodore John Pearson, 28 October 1927 and Operational orders by Commander Allan Poland, 18 October 1927, both in TNA, ADM 116/2502.
[157] Captain Charles Brodie to Admiralty, 21 January 1924, TNA, ADM 116/2262.

ultimately sank.[158] Submarines were certainly not ideally suited to stopping pirated vessels peacefully, but they nonetheless supplemented the China Station's other means of reconnaissance and intelligence gathering. Wireless technology therefore enabled the Navy to become more efficient in covering the expansive waters around China's coastline. Numerous, cheap to maintain, small, lightly crewed vessels and aircraft equipped with radios could act as the Navy's eyes and ears, not just in wartime, but also during peace.[159] The handful of larger vessels available would then be free to respond only when they were really needed.

Improvements in the speed news travelled between naval posts could and did help improve the accuracy of knowledge the Navy possessed about events in China. However, there was no organised system for gathering and assessing intelligence reports, and then disseminating guidance around the China Station. Whereas the Foreign Office compiled a single document containing summaries of the intelligence updates sent in by its consuls on a range of pertinent diplomatic topics, submitted on a quarterly basis, the Admiralty only received intermittent reports subject to individual officers' judgement.[160] The Foreign Office quarterly reports do not appear to have been shared with the Admiralty on an official basis, although some informal exchanges of information between officials working in China seems probable. Technology had advanced, but the process used to report developments and keep ship's officers informed remained largely unchanged from the age of sail.[161] That absence of a coordinated understanding of the situation in China was to be exposed by the escalating events of late 1926.

While there was a Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) presence in China, its regional officers were forbidden from sharing their reports with even senior British officials in East Asia.[162] As a result, SIS was blamed by the armed forces for the lack of forewarning about how tense the situation had become in China during 1926, leading to an order from Cabinet in January

[158] Unpublished autobiography of Commander Brian Dean RN, IWM, Documents 7792, pp.77-78; Telegram from Hong Kong administration to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 21 October 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2502.
[159] Thomas C. Hone, Norman Friedman, & Mark D. Mandeles, *American and British Aircraft Carrier Development 1919-1941,* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1999), p.108.
[160] E.g. Foreign Office Quarterly Intelligence Report, 3 August 1924, TNA, FO 371/6635; Royal Navy Intelligence Report on Piracy in China, 3 December 1924, TNA, FO 371/10252.
[161] Wells, 'Naval Intelligence and Decision Making', p.123.
[162] Memorandum by Lieutenant-Colonel Hanson, February 1928, TNA, WO 106/5258. The Secret Intelligence Service is more commonly known by its earlier title: MI6.

1927 forcing greater disclosure. With SIS's Asian operations later described as the 'Cinderella Branch' of the Service - largely forgotten and starved of resources - it is unlikely that SIS had much information to disclose in any event.[163] Britain's failure to foresee the crisis of 1927 cannot be solely attributed to SIS's failings and was certainly a result of the wider, disorganised nature of Britain's military intelligence gathering apparatus in East Asia. Indeed, a number of contemporary decisions indicate that the armed forces were starting to recognise that there were significant deficiencies in their own organisations.

In early 1927, there was a tense exchange of messages between the War Office and Major-General John Duncan, commanding the Shanghai Defence Force. The orders and demands from Whitehall show a profound nervousness that Britain did not know the strength or intentions of the different Chinese armies.[164] As a result, on 23 April the War Office issued orders for the creation of a temporary Shanghai Intelligence Bureau, to gather information in support of the Shanghai Defence Force.[165] A further order was issued the following month that the new Bureau should become a permanent establishment, gathering military intelligence from Northern China to Malaya in co-ordination with the existing military attaches in Beijing and Tokyo.[166] In the subsequent months both the Admiralty and Air Ministry followed suit in making their own changes. For the Royal Navy, this involved clearly assigning an officer aboard every China Station vessel to intelligence duties, required to report regularly to regional staff officers based at Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore, who would in turn pass on vital information to a senior officer on the Commander in Chief's staff.[167] It was only through the combination of both structural and technological changes that the Royal Navy was able to improve the consistency and accuracy of understanding what was occurring in China, across the China Station and along the command chain.

By 1930, the China Station was regularly using signals intelligence, rapidly passing news from ship to ship over long distances, and had in place an organised structure to exploit that wealth of information to try to form a single, unified approach to dealing with China. While individual ship's commanders retained considerable leeway to act on their own initiative,

[163] Richard J. Aldrich, 'Britain's Secret Intelligence Service in Asia during the Second World War', *Modern Asian Studies* 32/1 (1998), 181.
[164] Orders from War Office to Major-General Duncan, 22 February 1927, TNA, WO 106/5258.
[165] Memorandum by Colonel Wagstaff, 23 April 1927, TNA, WO 106/5258.
[166] Instructions from Major-General Charles to Colonel Blaker, 24 May 1927, TNA, WO 106/5258.
[167] Naval intelligence organisation chart, 1928, TNA, WO 106/5258.

this represented a significant shift towards a centralised command system. Counter intuitively, however, the changes strengthened rather than weakened the position of the Commander in Chief. While Whitehall could issue tighter instructions and orders to guide developments, implementation of policy remained at the Admiral's discretion, which he was able to enforce over his officers with greater control. For all the changes though, ultimately the strength of the system was still dictated by officers' behaviour, influenced by their training, personalities, and experience. Those individual decisions were to play significant roles in some of the pivotal crisis moments during the decade.

Responding to crises

More efficient news gathering and transmitting capabilities had led to changes in how the Royal Navy's vessels were distributed across the China Station, which in turn influenced how the Navy responded to threats around the region. New technology also had a deeper impact in changing the way in which the Royal Navy went about its work. In dealing with piracy, for example, wireless technology allowed the substitution of submarines for surface vessels on patrol duties, but also provided options for a very different underlying approach to the problem.

Before radios became readily available in East Asia, the Royal Navy was generally unable to respond to acts of piracy until well after the event. As a result, valuable goods were frequently stolen and in some cases the entire ship's cargo was lost. The only proactive steps the Navy could take involved maintaining a deterrent, in the form of naval patrols or stationing armed guards on vulnerable merchant steamers. Both options required significant amounts of manpower, which came at a cost. Indeed, with only fifty-three crew aboard each fully manned *Insect* class gunboat, and as few as twenty-five on others, the Navy did not have enough spare men to provide regular armed guards along river routes.[168] Even the Navy's preferred option of making the police in the main ports inspect passengers' luggage was manpower intensive and crucially it proved largely ineffective. In 1929, for example, the Shanghai Municipal Police checked for weapons the passengers of ninety two ships set to depart the Bund, at the request of their captains, but only found one group of

[168] Konstam, *Yangtze River Gunboats*, Appendix.

suspected pirates from all those efforts.[169] With many hundreds of ships passing through the main ports every month, inspections were disruptive, expensive, and produced very limited results.

The ability for merchant vessels to radio for assistance in the event of emergency provided the possibility for naval vessels to catch pirates in the act, while still able to perform other day-to-day duties. Even where the attacked merchant vessel did not have a radio, passing ships or patrolling warships could request assistance on the victim's behalf and then coordinate a search for the perpetrators. In essence, the merchant vessels became additional eyes and ears for the Navy, in return for the protection the Navy provided.

At 05.25 on 16 November 1926 the sloop HMS *Bluebell* radioed Hong Kong reporting that it had spotted a ship on fire in Daya Bay.[170] After reaching and boarding the affected ship, the Butterfield and Swire's steamer SS *Sunning, Bluebell* confirmed by radio at 09.18 that the vessel had been attacked by pirates. Within seven minutes the flagship HMS *Hawkins* ordered HMS *Hermes* to send out aircraft to search for the pirates, as well as passengers who were believed to have been taken hostage in the ship's lifeboats. As a result, two aircraft were underway just over half an hour after confirmation was received. The cruisers *Despatch* and *Vindictive* were ordered to sail for the bay as soon as possible. *Hawkins* also radioed other merchant vessels in the area both as a warning and to request their assistance in searching for the lifeboats. Through the combined efforts, by 15.32 a Norwegian merchant vessel and one of the *Hermes'* aircraft had separately radioed in that they had located the missing lifeboats.

That night Admiral Edwyn Alexander-Sinclair radioed further, very precise, orders to Captain Ronald Howard of HMS *Vindictive* on exactly what action Howard was allowed to take regarding reports that two female passengers had been taken hostage ashore.[171] Sinclair made it clear that landing parties could only be sent ashore if the reports were first confirmed, with advance warning provided to the local Chinese authorities. Indeed, Sinclair ordered *Vindictive* to use its three spotting aircraft to conduct the primary search for the missing women on shore, as it should avoid any accidental clashes with Chinese troops. In

[169] Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1929, SMA, U1-1-942.
[170] Report from Admiral Sinclair to Admiralty, 24 November 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2502.
[171] Orders from Admiral Sinclair to *Vindictive,* 16 November 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2502.

either event firing was explicitly forbidden, unless British servicemen first came under fire. Fortunately, it was established by the following noon that all but one of the *Sunning's* passengers and crew were safe, with the exception believed to have drowned trying to escape the attack. Eighteen pirates were arrested during the recovery operation and some of the looted goods were recovered. The case highlights how radio equipment allowed a quick response to a piracy attack, along with the better co-ordination of the responding ships to secure a comparatively peaceful and diplomatic incident free resolution.

The China Station's commander's ability to guide events from a distance was only of real significance though, given a similar improvement in his ability rapidly to despatch reinforcements to those areas where he felt the situation to be critical. *Hermes'* deployment was extremely valuable in that sense, because the high-speed and large capacity of aircraft carriers made them ideal for rapidly moving troops and supplies in response to crises.[172] Apart from the handful of cruisers, most warships posted to the China Station were only capable of transporting one or two dozen servicemen in addition to their small crews. The sloop HMS *Bluebell,* for example, was only felt safe to carry thirty-four marines for a short journey between Hong Kong and Guangzhou, in addition to its normal crew of seventy-seven.[173] Under normal circumstances, warships smaller than a cruiser were not regularly posted a marine detachment of their own. This was a problem during a crisis as Royal Marines or British Army troops were preferable for shore work, compared with ordinary seamen, given their training and equipment. The 'small' carrier *Hermes*, in contrast, could accommodate hundreds of additional service personnel and their equipment, if required. For the anti-piracy raid at Daya Bay on 31 August 1927, for example, *Hermes* and the cruiser *Danae* transported almost all of the 476 servicemen landed, with only the destroyer *Sirdar* and sloop *Foxglove* assisting.[174] There was also a 'substantial' reserve force held back aboard the vessels, in case the landing force got into trouble, making a sizable total force transported by the four vessels. Indeed, based upon a 1938 assessment by the Navy, *Hermes* alone was capable of transporting the entire force while remaining fully functional as an aircraft carrier.[175]

[172] Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower,* p.80.
[173] Diary entry of Commander C.H. Drage 15 December 1923, IWM, PP/MCR/99, Volume 4 (1923-1926).
[174] Captain of *Hermes* to Commodore Hong Kong, 4 September 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2502.
[175] Manual of Combined Operations, 1938, TNA, WO 287/43.

Civilian steamers were generally used to transport personnel between distant ports, such as when the Shanghai Defence Force was deployed from the United Kingdom in early 1927.[176] With many weeks required for those long distances journeys the slower, but more efficient, pace of commercial vessels was not considered to be a major disadvantage. The steamships also normally afforded greater comfort for the transported servicemen, particularly the officers who enjoyed the luxury of first class booths.[177] The Atlantic Transport Line steamship *Minnesota,* for example, was used to transport the 12th Royal Marine Battalion to Shanghai, but only had a maximum speed of fourteen knots.[178] In contrast, *Hermes* was equipped with the latest oil-fuelled boilers and could sustain twenty-five knots, over long distances if required, with fewer maintenance concerns compared with older coal-fuelled vessels.[179] The Admiralty also considered using the larger carrier, HMS *Furious,* which could transport troops from Portsmouth to Shanghai an estimated twelve days sooner than *Minnesota*.[180] Carriers were the first choice when time was considered critical; the higher expense in fuel and wear could be justified, and comfort was not a consideration.[181] One of the most impressive examples was in 1929 when HMS *Courageous* transported a full infantry battalion of 734 servicemen over 1,000 nautical miles from Malta to Haifa in just 48 hours, averaging twenty one knots.[182] For movement around China's coastline, *Hermes* therefore gave the Royal Navy a rapid 'heavy lift' capability, which would have been entirely impossible just two decades earlier.

After transporting a force, and once the shore parties had alighted into small boats to head ashore, *Hermes* was also capable of returning to its primary role as an aircraft carrier. During the 31 August 1927 raid, for example, *Hermes* provided aerial cover for much of the mission. The value of an aerial overflight was highlighted during the short period when aircraft temporarily based at Kai Tak took over from *Hermes'.* At 11.45am, shortly after arriving on the scene, the aircraft's observers spotted a column of Chinese troops approaching the

[176] War Diaries of 12th Royal Marine Battalion on service in China, 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8709/102.
[177] Interview with I.L. Wight, 1982, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 6196, 5 minutes.
[178] Jonathan Kinghorn, *The Atlantic Transport Line, 1881-1931,* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2012), pp.178-242.
[179] Jordan, *Warships after Washington,* p.155.
[180] Memorandum on the despatch of naval reinforcements to Shanghai, 14 January 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8711/144.
[181] Memoranda discussing the importance of aircraft carriers to the Royal Navy, 1921, TNA, AIR 5/167.
[182] Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower,* p.142.

shore party. The regular updates subsequently provided through messages dropped directly to the shore party and radioed to *Danae* enabled Captain Lachlan MacKinnon to move his force away from the approaching Chinese troops and avoid a potential clash.[183] Despite 200 Chinese troops coming within 100 metres of the landing force at one point, Captain MacKinnon later reported that he only knew about their presence due to the aerial reports.[184] Photographs taken from the aircraft illustrate this point, with rows of houses and trees clearly restricting the ground observers' field of vision.[185]

Being able to provide an aerial scouting force was even more valuable to the Royal Navy by the 1920s, given the greater availability of modern weaponry in China. It was increasingly probable that Britain's shore parties might encounter armed groups of soldiers or bandits, who could bring to bear a comparable or superior level of firepower. Of primary concern to naval officers was therefore the greater possibility of suffering casualties during any landing operation. At a senior level, however, there was also concern about what impact sustained firefights with Chinese troops would have on Britain's relationship with China. If a shore party came under heavy fire it would almost certainly call on naval fire support to provide a covering bombardment, to facilitate their evacuation, as happened during the Nanjing Incident. Firing large calibre naval guns brought with it the almost certain likelihood of numerous Chinese fatalities. If those killed were from the groups firing upon British servicemen then the incident, while hardly positive, could be defended under the contemporary understanding of rules of engagement. The situation was not that simple though, as most naval guns in use by Britain's gunboats, sloops, and destroyers were not designed for shore bombardments. Moreover, the targets involved were often centred in locations inhabited by civilians or in close proximity to civilian areas, making accuracy a paramount requirement.

Naval gunfire at Wanxian and Nanjing

Two of the most dramatic and significant single moments involving the Royal Navy in China during the 1920s involved naval gunfire, both of which highlight the issues of accuracy. The

[183] Reports by Lieutenant J. Findlay and Lieutenant R. Armour, September 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2502. The aircraft were meant to radio *Hermes* and the shore party, but due to technical difficulties were only able to raise *Danae* and used the primitive but effective technique of dropping written messages to the shore party.
[184] Report by Captain MacKinnon, 1 September 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2502.
[185] Assorted aerial photographs, September 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2502.

casualties resulting from the shore bombardments during the botched cutting out expedition to Wanxian in 1926 and then the use of naval gunfire support at Nanjing in 1927 played a significant role in fanning the flames of anti-imperial fervour in China. Simple technical considerations played an important, but previously unreported role in the tragic outcomes of both events.

The 6" 'quick-fire' guns on most of the British gunboats, 12-pounder guns on the *Acacia* class sloops, and the different variations of main guns on Britain's cruisers were all naval guns. They were designed for hitting other vessels on a relatively flat trajectory, over a medium range, which would also be at sea level. When firing at ground-based opponents at short range, often behind the riverine levees bordering China's rivers, shells would almost certainly over-shoot the target due to the very precise angle required on such a shallow trajectory. A change in elevation of just one degree for a 6" gun, for example, would lead to the shell landing a further 1,000 yards away.[186] The cruisers had some basic systems to calculate accurate gun-laying angles at sea, but even with those tables aiming was still largely reliant on manual estimation.[187] On the gunboats, accuracy was entirely down to the abilities of the gun commander and his crew, and their state of mind during the action. Many gunnery officers only had basic experience and training in shore bombarding, making precise shooting at ground targets very unlikely.[188] This was a factor in the cause of civilian casualties both at Nanjing and Wanxian, where over the course of events naval guns were fired at combatants located on a hillock and city wall respectively. None of the following points are intended to deny or distract from the fact that British warships did fire upon the two cities, and in doing so caused many innocent civilian casualties. The aim is to provide an objective assessment of factors that influenced the outcome, and tender potential explanations for the discrepancies in existing accounts about the numbers of those killed.

At Wanxian in August 1926, Royal Navy boarding parties aboard the armed merchant vessel *Kiawo* triggered a firefight with Chinese troops, while attempting to 'cut out' two British merchant steamers being detained by the city authorities. When the *Kiawo* came under fire,

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[186] *Instructions for Mounting, Using, and Caring for 6-inch Rapid-fire Gun*, (Washington, 1917), p.19. The weapon referred to in the manual was of an older variant to that used on HMS *Emerald* at Nanjing, but the range table is similar enough for indicative purposes.
[187] Jon T. Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology, and British Naval Policy, 1889-1914,* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.315-316.
[188] de Winton, *Ships in Bottles*, p.28.

the supporting gunboat HMS *Widgeon* engaged Chinese troops on and near the city wall. Approximately twenty minutes into the fight HMS *Cockchafer* then began firing at the military headquarters of General Yang Sen, sited on a hill within the city.[189] At Nanjing in March 1927, a bombardment was made in response to a request for fire support from a shore-party of twelve American marines. The group had been cornered on 'Socony' Hill by rioting Chinese troops, while attempting to evacuate ninety American civilians.[190] Bordered on its western edge by the city wall, Socony Hill is a relatively small and steep sided hillock near the north-western corner of the old Nanjing city walls, approximately thirty metres above river-level at its peak. The cruiser HMS *Emerald,* and destroyers USS *William B Preston* and USS *Noa* replied to the request with a few heavy opening salvoes of shrapnel shells, followed by a slow series of high explosive shells as the shore party was withdrawn.[191] The American destroyers also opened fire at shore-targets with machine guns.[192]

In both Wanxian and Nanjing, trying to hit precise targets on shore using the warships' main guns meant that the angle required had to be accurate to within a few minutes, rather than degrees. In cases with such fine margins of error, gunnery officers were reluctant to risk firing short and potentially hitting their colleagues, and so guns were more likely to be aimed high.[193] Cases involving over-shooting during shore bombardments, were not unique to events in China. It had been a significant concern during the Gallipoli campaign in 1916, had occurred during contemporary training exercises, and was later seen during Second World War amphibious operations.[194]

Manual inaccuracy appears to have been a significant factor at Wanxian, particularly after the British gunboats came under fire. Rear Admiral Hugh Tweedie later attributed at least some of the civilian casualties to *Widgeon's* gun crews being unable accurately to hit the

[189] Pugsley and Macintyre, *Destroyer Man*, p.18; Eyewitness report reprinted from the Central China Post, 17 September 1926, in *The Wanhsien Epic*, (Hankow, 1926), NMRN, 1979/216, p.66.
[190] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* p.134.
[191] As seen in the photographs of HMS *Emerald* firing on Nanjing, 1927, IWM, Q 83188 & Q 83189.
[192] Hone and Hone, *Battle Line*, p.166.
[193] Gunnery training log - 'Fall of shot and analyses chart' and associated notes, 17 July 1922, KCLMA, Catalogue ID 1238.
[194] Gunnery training log - 'Fall of shot and analyses chart' and associated notes, 17 July 1922, KCLMA, Catalogue ID 1238; Peter Liddle, *Men of Gallipoli: the Dardanelles and Gallipoli experience*, (London: Allen Lane, 1976), p.43; Roskill, *Naval Policy between the Wars,* p.191.

Chinese troops and field guns positioned in front of and on top of the high city wall. Tweedie indicated that a significant amount of ammunition was fired over the top into populated areas beyond.[195] An anonymous eyewitness report postulated that *Widgeon* fired a few hundred two pound (0.9kg) high-explosive 'pom-pom' shells.[196] While there are grounds to doubt the accuracy of other sections within that account, that particular detail does tally with clues in other descriptions. This includes a report by Consul A.P. Blunt from October 1926, by which point he had been able to explore the city, detailing that large quantities of smaller calibre shells had hit buildings on the slope immediately behind the wall. In Blunt's opinion most of the damage caused there had been a result of secondary fires, although he made no mention of how many deaths were related to that damage.[197] Along with these lighter shells, an unquantified amount of machinegun fire was also directed at the city wall, with bullets sent over the target just as deadly to bystanders as shells.

What Tweedie did not mention was the lack of shielding or temporary protection around *Cockchafer's* 6" main gun. The absence of even basic defensive preparations led to the warship's captain Lieutenant Commander Leon Acheson and many of the gun-crew being wounded during the incident. With the men left dangerously exposed and suffering casualties, aboard a moving vessel, it seems certain that *Cockchafer's* attempted bombardment of Yang Sen's headquarters was largely inaccurate, with shells landing in the densely populated surrounding area.[198] Again this is supported by Blunt's account, which noted that most of the damage caused by the British bombardment had been up on the hill - *Cockchafer's* target area.[199] While it is more difficult to corroborate the anonymous witness' figure for *Cockchafer,* they suggested that somewhere between twenty-four and thirty-six of the larger shells were fired into the city.[200] It is unclear why Acheson was unable or unwilling to prepare his vessel during the days while he was waiting for *Kiawo* and *Widgeon* to arrive in support. Acheson's motivation for attempting to shell the headquarters of the general with whom he had only recently had a ferocious argument, is a little easier to

[195] Tweedie, *The Story of a Naval Life*, p.241.
[196] 'Report from an eyewitness' in *The Wanhsien Epic*, (Hankow, 1926), NMRN, 1979/216, p.16.
[197] Consul A.P. Blunt to Sir Ronald Macleay, 15 October 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[198] Pugsley and Macintyre, *Destroyer Man,* pp.18-19.
[199] Consul A.P. Blunt to Sir Ronald Macleay, 15 October 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[200] 'Report from an eyewitness' in *The Wanhsien Epic*, (Hankow, 1926), NMRN, 1979/216, p.17.

deduce. While the limitations of the weapons in use did therefore play a role in the damage done to Wanxian, a wider range of factors contributed to the scale of the destruction.

In contrast to Wanxian, reports from naval personnel and British, American, and French civilian observers all agree that the naval gunfire at Nanjing was generally well-aimed. [201] Monsignor Roger Caplain, of the *Postes Chinoises*, began his observation after the first salvo:

> The shot was admirably set upon the hill, where the residences of the Standard Oil Company… were located, about 300 metres south-south-west of our residence. I later learned that the shrapnel shot had been executed by Lieutenant O'Connor of HMS *Emerald* and as a (former) artilleryman, I would like to congratulate him.[202]

The British gun-crews aboard the stationary *Emerald* were in comparative safety and conducted most of the firing at a steady and relatively slow pace of one round per minute.[203] Contemporary photographs support reports from the time that the hill and immediate vicinity was sparsely populated wasteland, limiting the likelihood of collateral damage from accurately directed fire.[204] Nonetheless, given the precise accuracy required to hit the apex of Socony Hill, it is probable that at least a few shells over-shot the target. As thirty-six of the seventy-six shells fired by *Emerald* at Nanjing were shrapnel, with timed fuses that detonated before they could significantly over-shoot the target, the precise number of shells detonating in areas well beyond the target was very low.[205] Based upon the information available, the bombardment at Nanjing appears to have been conducted as accurately as possible, within the restrictions of using largely manually-aimed, high-velocity naval guns. Those technical limitations, however, meant that a small number of British shells almost certainly did miss their intended target, potentially by quite some distance.

[201] First-hand accounts and letters of commendation by British and American participants of the incident, April 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8711/149.
[202] Report by R. Caplain (trans. M. Heaslip), 28 March 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8711/149.
[203] Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book.
[204] Photographs of Socony Hill taken by Midshipman Burnett, 24 March 1927, KCLMA, Catalogue ID 2243; Photograph of Socony House, April 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8711/149; Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution in China,* p.91.
[205] Report from Captain England to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 29 March 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8711/149.

Accusations made at the time and since that the Royal Navy deliberately bombarded civilian areas as a punitive measure are therefore at least partially true.[206] In both cases the decision to fire was made with the knowledge that any bombardment, with the naval guns available, was going to be at least moderately inaccurate and so shells would hit unintended, possibly populated, districts. Captain England's own testimony about the Nanjing Incident is telling in this regard, when he stated that three hours before the actual request was made, he had already decided that in the event of Socony Hill being rushed, he would order the bombardment of the area directly behind the hill in support.[207] While that target involved an unpopulated mixture of woodland and open waste ground, England would have known the limitations of his main guns, given the challenging trajectory required.[208] As a result, he would have also known the likelihood of missing that area and therefore the potential for civilian deaths, whether or not he intended them. Indeed, with both the British and American consulate buildings located near Socony Hill, England will also have been aware of the potential for 'friendly-fire' casualties.

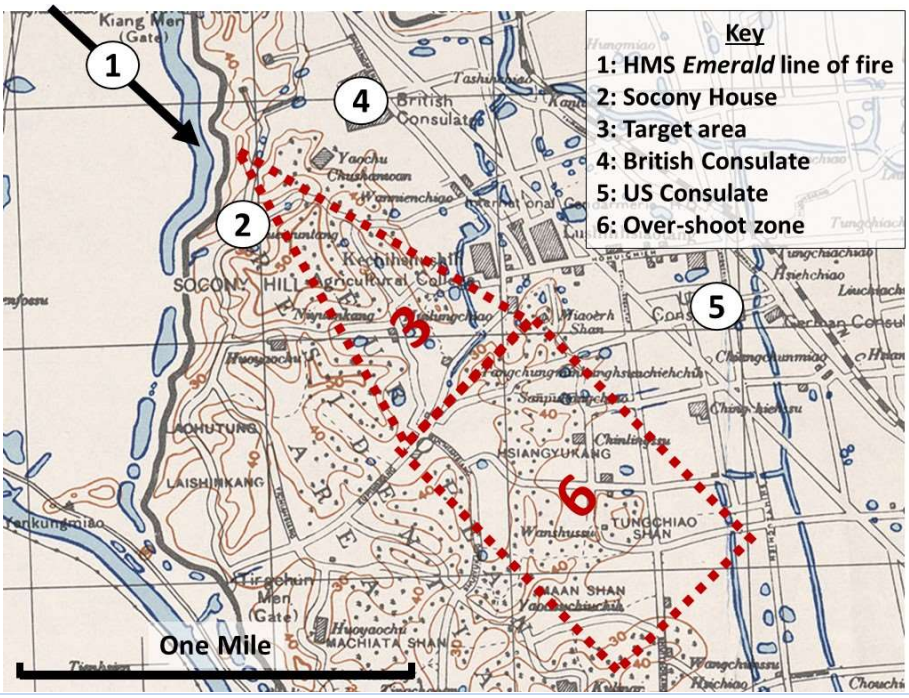
A similar account for Wanxian is provided by Lieutenant Anthony Pugsley, who was aboard *Widgeon*, in which he later argued that the gunboats had only deliberately targeted military objectives. The reliability of Pugsley's account is open to question, however, as it does contain some rather obvious attempts to deflect blame, resulting from an apparent sense of guilt.[209] It is true that inaccurate gunnery contributed to the high civilian death count at Wanxian, something acknowledged by the Navy at the time.[210] Given the scale of damage caused though, it is also fair to say that accuracy was not the primary, or even a significant, factor that led to civilian areas of the city being bombarded. The events at the two cities were therefore slightly different. England's fervent desire to attack the city punitively on 25 March strongly suggests that he was entirely comfortable with Chinese civilian casualties. Nonetheless, regardless of those feelings, when he actually gave the order to fire on 24 March, he focused on an area of open ground. *Widgeon's* firing at Chinese troops on the city

[206] E.g. Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain in Shanghai*, p.50; Osterhammel, 'China', pp.652-653; Wilbur, *Nationalist Revolution in China,* p.92.
[207] Copy of letter from Captain England to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 'Papers relating to the Nanjing Incident of March 24 and 25 1927', *China* 4, (HMSO, 1927).
[208] Photographs of Socony Hill taken by Midshipman Burnett, 24 March 1927, KCLMA, Catalogue ID 2243; Photograph of Socony House, April 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8711/149.
[209] Pugsley and Macintyre, *Destroyer Man,* pp.18-19.
[210] Rear-Admiral Cameron to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 17 September 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.

walls may fall in a similar category, but *Cockchafer's* bombardment of Yang Sen's Headquarters was of dubious military value and very probably intended for purely punitive purposes.

Even with the likelihood that some British shells were over-shot at Nanjing, a small detail in Captain England's official report also raises questions about the resulting number of casualties. When outlining the targeting of *Emerald's* earlier salvoes, England noted that they were aimed at the area of open ground slightly to the rear-left of Socony Hill, from the ship's perspective (see Figure 11). This appears to have been the direction from which the Chinese individuals participating in the events were approaching the house. Given that *Emerald* was moored by the Butterfield and Swires' hulk at Hsiakwan, the resulting line of fire made it far less likely that over-shot shells would land in densely populated areas of the city.[211]

Figure 11: Map of Socony Hill and the surrounding area in 1927[212]



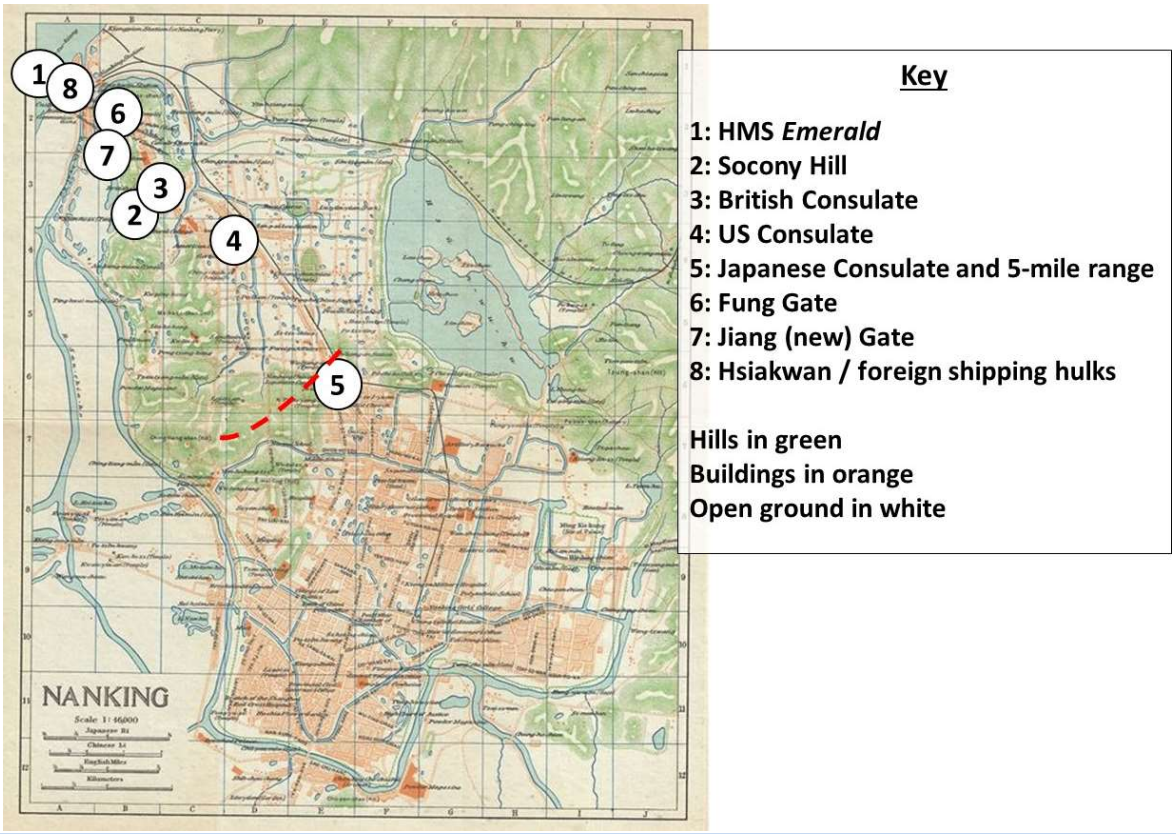
In the northern half of Nanjing the two main populated areas were around the river shoreline outside the city walls, and then a strip running from the Fung (Chung) Gate past

[211] 'Short Account of the Voyages and Deeds of HMS Emerald October 1925 to June 1928', IWM, p.50; Report from Captain England to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 29 March 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8711/149; Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book.
[212] 1927 British War Office Map of Nanjing, Re-published by the US Army 1945, Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, [Nanjing] Nanking 1945.

the British and US consulates, to the small Sanpailou railway station. Neither of these districts was within *Emerald's* field of fire. Instead the area directly beyond *Emerald's* target was largely open, apart from Nanjing's fledgling agricultural college (now the Nanjing University of Finance and Economics), a small temple, and a few bungalows among the wooded hillocks that formed the city's European residential quarter. This was not specific to the western section of the city, with large areas within the old walls formed of little more than sparsely populated wasteland in this period.[213] To have reached a densely populated city district, the shells would have had to over-shoot by roughly three miles, a total of five miles from *Emerald* (see Figure 12). That was quite a distance given the increase in trajectory required, even when allowing for the difficulty in aiming at a hilltop. On flat ground, for example, that would have involved a change in gun elevation from 2.5 degrees to 13.5 degrees. It is therefore extremely unlikely that any over-shot shells, from *Emerald,* hit a densely populated area of the city.

[213] China Station General Briefing giving details of Nanjing, 1921, NMRN, 1979/240.

Figure 12: Map of Nanjing in 1924[214]



Assessing potential civilian casualties purely through using maps of the area only provides a very rough indicator and one that should not be used alone, as the maps generally show blocks of buildings and obviously do not illustrate population movements. Eye-witness testimonies provide some supporting evidence, to help us understand what was actually happening in northern Nanjing on the day. Consul-General Giles, for example, mentions in his account that most of the Chinese civilians that he saw in the northern part of the city were located around the Fung and Jiang gates – well away from the target area. While he mentions numerous soldiers and a police officer near the British consulate, his account outlines that no shells landed in the immediate vicinity.[215] That was also the same area as where Roger Caplain was located, whose account makes no mention of shells landing in his immediate vicinity.[216] Likewise, Lieutenant Oliver-Bellasis who was in Socony House stated that 'The shells burst either in open country or against the walls and hills', although he did

[214] Japanese Government Railways Map, *Guide to China with land and sea routes between the American and European Continents second edition*, (Tokyo, 1924).
[215] Report of personal experiences of Consul-General Giles, 9 April 1927, 'Papers relating to the Nanjing Incident of March 24 and 25 1927', *China* 4, (HMSO, 1927).
[216] Report by R. Caplain (trans. M. Heaslip), 28 March 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8711/149.

acknowledge seeing one Chinese house hit.[217] Such written accounts have previously been open to question, given that the individuals concerned were not immune to bias. In conjunction with both maps and photographs of the target area, however, it appears likely that such statements contained a strong degree of truth, even if their subsequent assertions of minimal civilian casualties are more dubious. There is no evidence to suggest that the unpopulated nature of the target area and its hinterland formed part of Captain England's calculations. Indeed, he only mentioned the precise area the shelling was aimed at in passing, as part of the paperwork accounting for the expenditure of ammunition. His decision was not made, therefore, to avoid killing or wounding innocent bystanders. Nonetheless, that decision significantly reduced the number of shells fired by *Emerald* that could plausibly have landed in areas containing significant numbers of civilians, which would have been required for the scale of casualties listed in some historical accounts.

With friendly forces under fire in both cases and the warships' commanders therefore bound to provide covering fire, accusations of punitive bombardments appear academic in terms of the actual incidents. The weaponry available was, unfortunately, incapable of providing sufficiently accurate fire-support for civilian casualties to have been realistically entirely avoided. This was particularly true of Nanjing, although it was a lesser contributory factor at Wanxian. Midshipman Burnett noted that the Royal Navy landing party he was with, helping evacuate those trapped on Socony Hill, were themselves almost hit by one shrapnel shell burst, when one of the warships fired approximately 100 metres short of the target.[218] The group quickly fired two 'Very light' green flares as a warning for the warship to change its aim. Indeed, it is also worth noting, that even if an entirely accurate bombardment of the target area had been possible, it would still have resulted in civilian casualties, as some civilians were reported to have been present with the Chinese troops and looters on Socony Hill.[219]

A limitation of this assessment is that it does not examine the accuracy of the USN warships in detail. The American bombardment will have involved many of the same issues, and the first-hand reports suggest it was no less accurate than the British shelling, but the two US

[217] Report by Lieutenant R. Oliver-Bellasis, 1 April 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8711/149.
[218] Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book.
[219] Hone and Hone, *Battle Line*, p.166.

destroyers also machine-gunned targets ashore, which adds further complication. Consul-General Giles' account of where crowds had formed, for example, indicates that if such machinegun fire was directed around the hulks at Hsiakwan then there would have been numerous civilians in the line of fire.[220]

There is also evidence that suggests not all the civilian casualties that occurred due to shelling that day, were necessarily a result of Anglo-American actions. Gunboats operating under Guomindang authority bombarded various locations on 24 March, during fighting between the troops from the different factions.[221] Reports of Northern Expeditionary shelling are supported by photographs of Pukow, located on the opposite bank of the Yangtze to the area targeted by *Emerald,* which show fierce fires on both 24 and 25 March. The *North China Herald* also quoted eyewitnesses who stated that artillery belonging to southern forces was placed on Shizishan 'Lion' hill near the Fung Gate, and opened fire across the river at Pukow.[222] Burnett and England's accounts, however, state that those guns were only put into position on the 26th, indicating that the *Herald's* sources were mistaken in their recollection.[223] Fleeing northern troops did set fires and destroyed buildings in the area during their retreat, so some of the damage resulted from that scorched earth activity.[224] What is particularly pertinent is that no account suggests that any foreign warship fired upon Pukow and so any shelling there was entirely the result of fighting between the two Chinese forces.

Together, all these various factors explain why there are such widely differing numbers quoted for how many civilians perished at Nanjing, ranging from as low as 3, up to 2,000.[225] It is entirely plausible that fifteen was a British assessment based purely upon those civilians killed on Socony Hill, with the higher figure including casualties from over-shot Anglo-American shells, firing by Guomindang forces, and general violence in the city. By focusing

[220] Report of personal experiences of Consul-General Giles, 9 April 1927, 'Papers relating to the Nanjing Incident of March 24 and 25 1927', *China* 4, (HMSO, 1927).
[221] Cole, *Gunboats and Marines*, p.116.
[222] *North China Herald*, April 30 1927, p.2.
[223] Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book; Report from Captain England to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 29 March 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8711/149.
[224] E.g. Photographs of Pukow, March 1927, IWM, Q 83169 & Q 83184; Report from Rear Admiral Cameron to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 1 May 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510; Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book.
[225] Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire*, p.223; Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain in Shanghai,* p.50; Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution in China,* p.92.

upon the gunfire itself in detail, using a broad selection of alternative sources and not just general descriptions of the incidents, it is possible to say with reasonable confidence that the number of civilian casualties caused by British shelling at Nanjing was towards the lower end of the scale. In contrast, the inaccurate gunfire that occurred at Wanxian strongly supports those historians who argue that official British estimates of only 200 troops and eighty civilians killed were extremely conservative.[226] However, technical factors were not the only contributory factor in those deaths at Wanxian. Lieutenant Commander Leon Acheson's decision to direct *Cockchafer's* fire directly into populated areas, based upon Rear-Admiral Cameron's threat, and Acheson's failure to prepare any form of protective shielding for his gun-crews, were both significant to the end result. As will be further explored in the next chapter, Acheson was not solely responsible for what happened at Wanxian in 1926, but he did play a pivotal role in the deadly outcome.

To some extent the precise numbers of those killed in both cases were tragic but minor details in the bigger picture. It was the very act of bombarding the cities itself that enflamed passionate anti-imperial responses. Reports of mass casualties only adding fuel to the fire.[227] Nonetheless, whatever the exact figures attributable to the Royal Navy in those two cases, some of the problem of overshooting into civilian areas was avoidable with a relatively simple change in equipment. Arriving in the aftermath of the Wanxian Incident, the new Senior Naval Officer on the Yangtze – Rear-Admiral Tweedie – reported to the Admiralty that the gunboats' high velocity naval guns should be replaced with howitzers as soon as possible.[228] Ultimately, it was not until HMS *Falcon* and HMS *Sandpiper* were launched in 1932 and 1933 respectively, replacing two older gunboats, that 3.7" howitzers finally appeared on the China Station.[229] With a high arc of fire and low muzzle velocity, howitzers were better suited to landing shells in a tighter spread at short range, reducing the risk of causing collateral damage, and improving the chance of hitting the intended target. This would have significantly lowered the precision required from the gunnery officers in aiming their guns, while still being able to put shells into the right area. In doing so, the use of howitzers would therefore have also reduced the likelihood and magnitude of

[226] See: Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower,* p.200; Osterhammel, 'China', p.652.
[227] Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire,* pp.179-224.
[228] Tweedie, The *Story of a Naval Life,* pp.241-242.
[229] Konstam, *Yangtze River Gunboats*, Appendix.

civilian casualties. The Shanghai Volunteer Corps had already had its field guns replaced with howitzers, in 1921, for that very reason.[230] Likewise, China's own warlord navies had long understood this issue, and most Chinese river gunboats launched after 1912 were equipped with howitzers.[231] It is unlikely that the presence of howitzers aboard the Royal Navy's gunboats would have significantly altered the general course of events at either Wanxian or Nanjing. The use of naval guns was a factor, however, in causing additional and avoidable civilian casualties.

Both events came against a backdrop where civilian deaths caused by British commanded personnel, whether civilian or military, were increasingly the cause of strikes or boycotts of British goods. The better use of technology, such as howitzers in place of naval guns, or aircraft in place of shore parties, could reduce the possibility of creating significant headline incidents that would affect Britain's overall position in China. With growing nationalist sentiment in China, such incidents were no longer isolated to just the area they occurred in and could spark regional or nationwide reactions. This applied even to relatively small events, outside of major cities, which did not involve civilian casualties. For example, Commander Hamilton's use of HMS *Wanderer's* main guns against Guomindang troops near Jiangyin, in May 1927, prompted protests and warnings from Chiang Kai Shek himself to Admiral Reginald Tyrwhitt.[232] Previously warships on the Yangtze would normally only respond with small arms or medium calibre weapons to such firing, but *Wanderer* had expended seventy-eight 4.7" shells during its short engagement, which even Hamilton later conceded was excessive. Reports that the Chinese had fired first with a field gun appear to have provided sufficient balance to the argument for the Guomindang not to publicise the incident. Two weeks after the incident, however, Tyrwhitt told Hamilton in private that he wanted no further such incidents while he was working with the Foreign Office to decide a new policy towards the Guomindang.

Controlling the violence

While the technical specifications of *Emerald's* guns played a negative role in the violence at Nanjing, another technology had a more positive impact: the availability of radio

[230] Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1921, SMA, U1-1-934.
[231] Wright, *China's Steam Navy*, p.131.
[232] Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-1928, NMM, HTN 214.

equipment. The Anglo-American naval force present at the city was able to contact their respective commanders at Shanghai and receive a response within hours. The cautious joint reply by Admiral Williams USN, Vice-Admiral Tyrwhitt RN, and Rear-Admiral Jirō Araki IJN, was instrumental in Rear-Admiral Henry Hough USN and Captain England's decisions to negotiate with Guomindang representatives on the second day. As with the earlier *Sunning* incident, the senior commanders were able to provide guidance during the crisis, rather than just issuing new advice after the event. It was during that second phase, after the events at Socony Hill, when England began advocating, ardently, his own plan of immediately returning to using force by punitively bombarding the city.[233]

At this point, it is worth briefly mentioning Japan's involvement in the course of events. The Japanese naval force at Nanjing had adopted a cautious approach from the outset, as the Japanese consulate was situated deep within the old city. As a result, there was no realistic possibility of Japanese landing parties securing a safe evacuation if they used force. The Japanese consulate was also located well beyond the effective range of the IJN destroyers' main guns, and so fire-support could only be provided through a request to HMS *Emerald*, with an inevitable loss of face.[234] In contrast, the Anglo-American community was largely based in the northern part of Nanjing, nearest the Yangtze and the main railway station on the line to Shanghai. That section of the city was readily accessible to small boats using the Qinhuai River and city moat. While it is now hidden behind high-rise buildings, the city wall by Socony Hill was visible from the warships on the Yangtze. Admiral Araki's involvement in the joint reply was therefore for diplomatic rather than practical purposes.

Given that the British establishment largely accepted the subsequent argument made to justify the initial Nanjing bombardment as a defensive measure, it is curious that Tyrwhitt later claimed in private correspondence that he came close to replacing HMS *Emerald's* commander during the radio exchange.[235] Tyrwhitt stated that he felt Captain England was far too eager to resume bombarding Nanjing, which Tyrwhitt believed could lead to outright war in China, although it is difficult independently to confirm or counter Tyrwhitt's claims.[236] Certainly a second bombardment would have been difficult to justify as defensive, coming

[233] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* pp.137-138.
[234] Ibid.*,* p.139.
[235] Louis, *British Strategy in the Far East*, p.133.
[236] Patterson, *Tyrwhitt of the Harwich Force*, p.253.

after most British civilians and servicemen had been evacuated from the city. Tyrwhitt's official report only explicitly criticised *Emerald's* Royal Marine Captain Heathcote for having failed in his duty. Heathcote had left unarmed marines at the consulate on their own devices, with no organised plan for their defence, evacuation, or how he would return to them if required. Moreover, he was not present at the consulate during the events that followed.[237] The Nanjing Incident did lead to a form of punishment for Captain England though, who was removed from commanding HMS *Emerald* one month later and placed in a semi-administrative role.[238] In the intervening weeks, the Admiralty had received and relayed a flurry of messages in support of England and his actions.[239] What was tantamount to a demotion stands out against a backdrop of such international praise. It is entirely plausible, therefore, that Tyrwhitt did indeed consider ordering the replacement of Captain England by radio from Shanghai. Just a decade earlier it would have been impossible for Tyrwhitt to have even considered such an extreme measure when not actually on the scene at Nanjing.

New technology made it possible for the Commander in Chief to use at different occasions, aircraft and radio messages, as part of efforts to avoid or subdue potential diplomatic incidents. If those attempts proved ineffective, he could rapidly assemble a force to provide a powerful localised deterrent. While this helped improve the effectiveness of the Royal Navy's counter-piracy work, ultimately when crises occurred there was little the available technology could do to limit the damage done by using high-velocity naval guns against targets in urban environments. Against the backdrop of the Northern Expedition and anti-British sentiment in China, 1926-1927, it was not technology that decided events. In practice, it was the willingness of the officers involved to use violence, their understanding of what gunboat diplomacy involved, and often their mistakes that dictated the course of events. This was all regardless of whether or not those officers' actions were in line with the Commander-in-Chief's or indeed Whitehall's wishes.

[237] Vice-Admiral Tyrwhitt to Admiralty, 22 April 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8711/149.
[238] Ship's log of HMS *Emerald,* 27 April 1927, TNA, ADM 53/76701.
[239] Assorted correspondence between American officials, the Foreign Office, the Admiralty, and Admiral Tyrwhitt, April 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8711/149.

Summary

By the 1920s the Royal Navy's use of new technology in 'waving the flag', as a means of boosting imperial prestige, does indeed appear to have waned on the China Station. Efforts to uphold the image of the Navy still regularly influenced officers' behaviour, and ordinary actions such as painting the warships in their bright white Far Eastern colours were maintained. Below the surface, however, the situation had changed and residual references to 'waving the flag' appear to have generally been intended for British metropolitan and particularly British colonial audiences. There is little evidence that technological change was behind this shift in approach, nor that the growing visible power and prestige of America and Japan produced a notable overt change in the Royal Navy's behaviour. The China Station continued to rely on small gunboats and unimpressive sloops, the despatch of an aircraft carrier had ulterior motives, and the Special Service Squadron only paused at Singapore. Overall, therefore, technology was primarily employed by the Admiralty where it served a practical purpose for the policing and defence of the British Empire. Intangible aims such as imperial prestige were secondary concerns.

Technological change, however, did have the potential to alter significantly the way in which the Royal Navy approached the challenges it faced, in its dealings with warlord China. By the end of the decade many new pieces of equipment were being used to great effect in improving Britain's understanding of what was occurring, and the way in which the China Station responded to adverse situations. Progress towards fully exploiting new technologies, however, was neither smooth nor was it systematic. While wireless communication helped prevent a second bombardment of Nanjing in May 1927, for example, its limitations had contributed to the failings that lead to the tragedy at Wanxian the previous year. So overall what impact did new technology really have on how the China Station operated across the 1920s as a whole and was that impact extraordinary compared to previous decades?

Probably the most significant changes were the improvements in efficiency across the China Station, which were heavily linked to the Navy's evolving command structure. By the mid-1920s the Commander in Chief was able to draw on up-to-date reports, in some cases only minutes old, to issue timely orders to either pro-actively or re-actively influence the course of events. Increasing centralisation of command fundamentally changed the way that the Navy operated in the region. Foremost, it allowed the force to become more flexible in its

approach. Rather than warships being posted to pre-defined areas and then acting independently, their actions could be co-ordinated. Forces could be dispersed to cover the widest area possible in supressing piracy or concentrated at times on a crisis point. Moreover, senior officers were able to order changes with increasing rapidity as wireless sets became more available, and more powerful. With the exception of the upper Yangtze, this meant that isolated smaller warships could, at least theoretically, be reinforced quickly by the Station's larger warships or ad hoc forces when required.

The knowledge that potentially hundreds of naval personnel, backed by large calibre guns, were only a radio message away was vital in maintaining Britain's position as China's armies and bandit gangs obtained modern weaponry. Indeed the withdrawal of gunboats from the upper Yangtze was not just because of the collapse in trade for British merchants operating deep inland during 1926.[240] The small upper Yangtze gunboats could not be reinforced in emergency, given the shallowness of the river between Chongqing and Hankou, and crucially they were no longer powerful enough to operate alone.[241] Taking into account the force available to the China Station, the greater flexibility afforded by wireless communication had managed to prolong the Navy's operations along the most peripheral stretches of China's waterways. Without that improvement, the Royal Navy would almost certainly have had to withdraw protection from many treaty ports, years before Austen Chamberlain's diplomatic announcement in December 1926.

Greater centralisation of command also reduced the heavy burden placed upon the junior officers commanding the gunboats and sloops, which were involved in the majority of interactions with the Chinese population and officials. By 1927, for example, the Commodore commanding the Pearl River Delta gunboats was able to take remote command of his whole force when responding to piracy incidents, with minute-by-minute updates from individual ships.[242] The limitations of the quite basic wireless sets in use across much of the Station did limit the extent to which there was a real change though, as seen during the Wanxian Incident when vital messages were unable to get through.

[240] Intelligence report from Senior Naval Officer Upper Yangtze, 15 April 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2510; Letter from Consul Pratt to Sir Miles Lampson, 14 March 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[241] Only the two Widgeon-class river gunboats had a sufficiently low draught to navigate the rapids and shallow waters of the upper Yangtze.
[242] Record of Royal Navy wireless transmissions on West River, 2 September 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2502.

Successful centralisation and coordination was also limited by individual behaviour. Some captains were unenthusiastic about relinquishing their freedom of command and others were quite willing to exploit the unclear post-wireless command structure to pursue individual strategies. In one such example, while posted as Commander of HMS *Wild Swan* at Jiujiang Louis Hamilton sent two platoons of armed seamen on a march into the city, despite knowing it went against the wishes of his immediate superior Rear-Admiral John Cameron. Hamilton proudly noted that he carefully timed and worded his wireless transmissions to avoid being countermanded and to establish pre-emptively a defence that he merely intended to exercise his men and so Chinese complaints were 'frivolous'.[243] Possessing the technical ability to communicate a centralised strategy in meeting challenges in China was not enough in itself to encourage greater adherence to that plan by individual officers. The training, career experiences, and attitudes of the service personnel on the China Station were more significant than technology in defining the course of events at key moments throughout the decade.

[243] Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-1928, NMM, HTN 214.

Chapter Four: Changing attitudes, ideas, and approaches

Technology was an important factor influencing the way events evolved on the China Station during the 1920s, but the decisions made by individuals on the scene were often extremely significant in defining the outcomes. Despite being a uniform force in theory, with men from very similar backgrounds and life experiences, the Royal Navy's officers could make notably different decisions and were given significant freedom to be able to do so. Variations in behaviour displayed by the Royal Navy's officers and ordinary servicemen in China therefore need to be assessed. During some of the key crisis moments, for example, there was considerable variety in the way the commanders and crews of individual ships reacted to flashpoints. Royal Navy officers in the early twentieth century may have come from the same mould, as Mary Jones has argued, but they were still individuals who possessed their own unique set of ideas and attitudes.[1] These differences extended along the full line of naval command into senior command, with Captain Francis De Winton recording shortly after the 1927 Nanjing Incident that 'Admiral Boyle wished to do some bombarding… and I believe the CinC had to restrain him.'[2] This chapter will explore both the mind-sets of the naval personnel involved in some of those key moments and the extent to which differences in attitudes was a factor in the outcomes. The overall intention being to evaluate the extent to which the Navy was actually a uniform entity in East Asia and how the Royal Navy's approaches towards meeting its aims in the region changed over the decade. As part of that examination, it will be considered how far naval staff were willing and able to adapt, developing and using alternative ways of going about their role defending Britain's interests across the region in the new interwar environment.

The different mentalities displayed by Royal Navy officers had an impact not only on the outcome of individual events, but also on the formation and implementation of the Navy's broader strategies and as a result on Britain's foreign policy. While improvements in communications technology enabled greater centralisation of command structure, the Admiralty still allowed its commanders considerable freedom to act on their own initiative.

[1] Jones, 'Towards a Hierarchy of Management', pp.171-172.
[2] de Winton, *Ships in Bottles*, p.28. The 'CinC' referred to was Vice-Admiral Tyrwhitt, with Admiral Boyle being the then Rear-Admiral William Boyle, later Admiral of the Fleet and 12th Earl of Cork and Orrery.

As a result, officers on the China Station were allowed to, and often did, deviate from their Admiralty script, based upon their own views of how Britain should deal with the challenges faced in the region. An influencing factor within that process was a web of personal allegiance within the command structure, which at times influenced the behaviour of individual officers and vessels. For most of the decade the China Station maintained a relatively stable collection of vessels and commanders. This provided senior officers with many months or even years to develop a reasonably homogenous understanding of how to respond to developments among their subordinates. During 1927, however, there was a sudden influx of warships from all around the world, with new vessels attached on an ad hoc basis to the China Station's various sub-commands. It therefore provides an unparalleled opportunity to explore whether the Navy possessed different regional identities. Ego and strong personalities may have been significant factors in disagreements between officers over the best course of action to pursue. Likewise, nervousness and tension caused by the strain of the seriousness of the events unfolding undoubtedly also played a part in causing disagreements, but there were far deeper issues at play. It is important to understand therefore, whether subtle background differences in professional cultures across the Navy's different stations strengthened, or indeed weakened, the officers' adherence to their viewpoints.

The term 'gunboat diplomacy' is often used to describe the Navy's main strategy in China prior to the December Memorandum in 1926, when Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain announced a new policy for China. While the exact definition of gunboat diplomacy continues to feature in theoretical discussions, there is general agreement about a number of its features as a strategy. At core it is 'the demonstration, threat, or use of limited naval force for political objectives', heavily linked to shows of force, but including the possibility of violence in an effort to coerce an opponent.[3] James Cable's four categories are often used as a broader definition, covering the range of approaches from 'expressive' behaviour conveying intangible, emotional messages, to 'definitive' actions intended at achieving a fait accompli.[4] In practice the tactics involved ranged from peacetime pageantry involving marching, music, and dinners, to the violent destruction of strategic fortifications by naval

[3] Robert Mandel, 'The Effectiveness of Gunboat Diplomacy', *International Studies Quarterly* 30/1 (1986), 59-61.
[4] Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, pp.39-83.

guns or shore parties. This did not and does not necessarily require the involvement of actual gunboats, although during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the strategy generally relied upon littoral warships of one sort or another. A number of key characteristics are common to all scenarios: the threat or use of force should be limited, the action should be aimed at coercing the adversary to submit, and it generally involves the opponent having to accept the long-term consequences of that submission.

Within that debate there has been discussion of what gunboat diplomacy in the 1920s entailed at a strategic level, but there has been little consideration of what the Navy's mainstream officers interpreted it to mean in practice and in theatre. As it was those operational officers who implemented the strategy, their attitudes are core to understanding how gunboat diplomacy impacted on Britain's relationship with China, on a day-to-day basis. A top-level definition is of great value in understanding what Whitehall and the Admiralty intended Britain's strategy in China to be. Exploring what ground-level officers believed the strategy to involve, however, is vital in explaining how events panned out in reality. The difference between the two interpretations in turn provides an insight into how effectively the command structure of the Royal Navy operated in the period. By defining what individual warship commanders saw gunboat diplomacy to mean, it will also be possible to better understand when exactly the approach went out of general use on the China Station and whether that transition happened in conjunction with the change in diplomatic approach in December 1926. Rather than a top-down shift in strategy, from gunboat diplomacy enforcing extra-territorial privileges to a more balanced relationship between Britain and China, it will be shown that developments on the periphery of Empire were well in advance of Austen Chamberlain's announcement. Moreover, failures to effectively control individual officers and to prepare a wave of new arrivals for service on China's rivers from mid-1926 meant that events on the scene did not always conform to either the local or official strategies.

Within the existing historiography there are many debates about the existence of anti-intellectualist attitudes and behaviour among the early twentieth century Royal Navy officer class, something that will also be discussed during this chapter.[5] Anti-intellectualism can be

[5] E.g. Harry W. Dickinson, *Educating the Royal Navy: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Education for officers,* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); C.I. Hamilton, *The Making of the Modern Admiralty: British Naval Policy-Making*

defined as a formative culture focusing on intangible personal attributes and social factors, at the expense of formal training and expertise in job-specific tasks. Indeed, anti-intellectualism is associated with the creation of a nepotistic system wherein those individuals whose abilities are purely meritocratic are discriminated against. That could take relatively subtle in-direct forms, such as the promotion of officers who kept their vessels particularly 'ship-shape', i.e. clean and practised in general drill, over those who were better at the core technical requirements involved in sailing and fighting.[6] It is important to note, that there is a difference between anti-intellectualism and a negative attitude towards advanced technology, as the two are not synonymous. A common attitude within the Navy of focusing upon the 'Nelson Spirit' over formal training and education, with daring gentlemen inspired by a cult of Nelsonian heroism, did not preclude those same officers valuing the use of new technology and equipment.[7] Admiral Hugh Tweedie is a particularly good example of this, having expressed a strong belief that spirit was more important than technical knowledge for senior command, while also being a proponent for using the latest equipment.[8] How officers were trained to go about their roles and what equipment they used while doing their work were two separate if closely related issues. During this chapter it will be the former factor that will be discussed; the aptitudes and prior preparation of the officers deployed on the China Station, along with their attitudes towards new ideas of how they should go about their work.

Late-Victorian gunboat diplomacy in East Asia

Between the end of the Napoleonic wars and the Carnarvon Commission in 1887, a core facet of the Royal Navy's global strategy was the use of gunboats in enforcing Britain's will. With near-complete naval supremacy at sea after Trafalgar, the Navy was able to focus on projecting its power into littoral regions of the world, a key factor in the expansion of both

1805-1927, (Cambridge: CUP, 2011); Elinor Romans, 'Leadership Training For Midshipmen, 1919-1939', in *Naval Leadership and Management 1650-1950*, ed. by Helen Doe and Richard Harding (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2012), pp.183-191; Bell, 'The King's English', 685-716; Marder, 'The Influence of History on Sea Power', 414-428; Moretz, *Thinking Wisely, Planning Boldly,* pp.1-23.

[6] Marder, 'The Influence of History on Sea Power', 439.

[7] Mike Farquharson-Roberts, *Royal Navy Officers from War to War, 1918-1939*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp.9-11; Bell, 'The King's English', 699; Dickinson, *Educating the Royal Navy*; Hamilton, *The Making of the Modern Admiralty*.

[8] Elinor Romans, *Selection and Early Career Education of Executive Officers in the Royal Navy c.1902-1939*, (unpublished Ph.D., University of Exeter, 2012).

the formal and informal elements of the British Empire. Trade agreements, port access, and diplomatic approaches could all be influenced by the timely arrival of the White Ensign, and with it the regular implicit threat and occasional actual use of violence. Small steam-powered warships, particularly those broadly classed as gunboats, were pivotal in enabling that strategy by extending the Navy's reach far inland along navigable waterways. With those same waterways acting as the main arteries of transport and commerce across much of the world, Britain's ability to exert some degree of control over them was a significant strategic advantage.

The Carnarvon Commission heralded the end of that Victorian approach, when it reported that the maritime arteries of the British Empire were increasingly exposed to new threats due to changes in the strategic environment.[9] Rather than focusing on ports, harbours, and convoys, the Navy felt it needed to defend the new electric telegraph networks and utilise the rapid communication available to deploy fast cruisers in search of reported commerce raiders. In effect, rather than trying to maintain a passive background global deterrent, the Navy wished to switch to an approach of rapid, concentrated reactive force. As a result of that shift in strategic focus, along with the first signs of an emergent naval arms race, the number of gunboats and sloops maintained by the Royal Navy started to be reduced. That process accelerated during the 1890s with the development of 'destroyers' as a new class of warship intended for the Navy's patrol and other day-to-day duties. While destroyers were normally no larger than the gunboats they effectively replaced, in those early years, they were fast and seaworthy enough to operate with the fleet.[10] One of the few exceptions to the rule of gunboat decline was the China Station, however, which retained both its gunboat force and the increasingly outdated approach of gunboat diplomacy.

The China Station's unique position in retaining a sizable gunboat force came from a mixture of geo-strategic circumstances and naval practicality. For coastal areas, destroyers could conduct many of the peace-time tasks previously done by gunboats, while also capable of operating with the fleet in wartime. That process of displacement occurred on the China Station, as it did elsewhere, with a flotilla of destroyers tasked with coastal patrols in the

[9] Roger Parkinson, *The Late Victorian Navy,* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008), p.239; John S.H. Major, *Send a Gunboat,* (London: Longmans, 1967), p.145.
[10] David Lyon, 'Underwater warfare and the torpedo boat', in *Steam, Steel, and Shellfire*, ed. by Robert Gardiner and Andrew Lambert (London: Conway Maritime, 1992), p.144; Major, *Send a Gunboat,* p.161.

late 1890s.[11] In contrast, riverine environments had slightly different requirements. Vessels needed propulsion equipment suited to overcoming river-rapids along with high levels of manoeuvrability, which gunboats possessed, rather than the combination of speed and sea-worthiness inherent in destroyer designs. Early destroyers could and did travel along the lower sections of major rivers, but venturing along smaller tributaries or far up-river was ill-advised. Indeed, even for purpose-built gunboats the Yangtze gorges were extremely challenging, and featured many near-misses, ships sunk, and the occasional stranding upon a rock (see Figure 13).[12] Within the formal British Empire, particularly along the Nile in Egypt and Sudan, the gradual introduction of armoured cars and automatic weaponry also meant there were alternative options for deploying significant firepower. As the only significant series of inland waterways globally in which the Royal Navy still sought to project power on a regular basis by the turn of the century, China's rivers continued to house British gunboats in peacetime.

Figure 13: Merchant vessels and the Upper Yangtze rapids in 1928[13]

For the most part, gunboat diplomacy in East Asia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries involved little more than 'waving the flag'. In other words, warships making regular patrols around the littoral regions of China and visiting the various treaty and open ports. At its most basic, it was believed that displaying the Union Flag and White Ensign atop a comparatively modern warship in a wide range of ports would increase the

[11] Navy List, 1897, RNM.
[12] Letters from Commander Berryman to his mother, 2 September 1926, IWM, Documents.1445.
[13] Photograph of vessels that did not make the rapids below Kun Lin Tan, 1928, US Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 95402.

prominence of and respect for the British Empire. When China experienced periods of unrest, the implicit threat of force provided by the presence of a British gunboat was also generally sufficient to instil a wariness in the Chinese population and ensure British interests were left alone. When protests against foreign interference in China did occasionally turn violent, lethal military force was often readily employed.[14] The magnitude of violence during the Boxer Rebellion, however, stands out as exceptional for the China Station between its formal separation as an independent command in 1865 and the start of the First World War. The events of 1900-01 therefore do not represent the on-going day-to-day reality of gunboat diplomacy. Captain Gerald Dickens noted that during his first spell in China 1903-05, for example: 'The people were friendly (although no doubt they had inward reservations about foreign devils generally) and such local bandits as existed kept out of our way'.[15]

When straying from their usual patrol grounds, or visiting a new port, officers might occasionally dine at banquets with local Chinese officials to extend courtesies and build working relationships.[16] Otherwise, for the men employed in operating the gunboat patrols, life generally constituted long, uncomfortable days afloat aboard the cramped gunboats, in between weeks ashore boxing and playing games of cricket, football, golf, rugby, and tennis. Indeed, sport was a defining feature of the China Station's brand of gunboat diplomacy. In part this was to emphasise the physical prowess of Britain's service personnel, but it was also simply conducted to pass the time in remote ports.[17] Of course, playing sport was not unique to the Royal Navy, with their American counterparts also keen sportsmen, but the British made it a public display of competitive fighting spirit to a much greater degree than other nations.

Sport was a subtler means of expressing power than many other options, such as parades or marching bands, which was useful during tense moments. In the aftermath of the May Thirtieth Incident at Shanghai, for example, on 5 June 1925 roughly 200 Royal Marines were landed ashore in the International Settlement in response to protests. The following day, the Royal Navy held a series of impromptu football matches between ship's crews in the

[14] Salkeld, 'Witness to the Revolution', 115-121.
[15] Unpublished autobiography of G.C. Dickens, undated, KCLMA, Catalogue ID 1114, Chapter two.
[16] Assorted memoranda and reports from the Yangtze gunboats, 1906-1907, TNA, ADM 125/127.
[17] Spence, *A History of the Royal Navy*, pp.98-100.

city.[18] Likewise, in March 1927 HMS *Cockchafer's* commander deliberately sent his men ashore to play sports at Ichang, only a few days after his gunboat had been at action stations prepared for violence in the city.[19] In both cases, the servicemen were quietly reinforcing Britain's extra-territorial rights, but not in such a brazen way that might provoke a resurgence in hostility. This was not just done in response to Chinese protests that were directed against the British. In June 1920, for example, Captain Arthur Walker of HMS *Colombo* landed the ship's company to march around Hankou the day after general protests in the city. The reason he gave to his sailors was that it would make a statement of British power, and 'boost the morale of the (British) public'.[20] For the most part, however, sport was normally used just as a means of keeping crews fit, entertained, and busy in a constructive way. Even with regular sporting events, crews still got into trouble by drinking, fighting, and following other pursuits in port, so that the Navy surgeons were kept busy.[21]

The quiet reality of gunboat diplomacy led many in the Navy to question the value of continuing the strategy. Admiral Cyprian Bridge, the commander in chief of the China Station between 1901 and 1904, dismissed the gunboat half of his force as being 'political and not naval' and even requested permission to retire the vessels.[22] Bridge argued that the response to the Boxer Rebellion had shown to the Chinese that Britain was not to be challenged, and any future crisis could just as well be met by larger vessels from Hong Kong.

Admiral Dudley Pound was also later to note that service on smaller vessels in East Asia was particularly unpopular with married men, who struggled to persuade their wives to move temporarily to Hong Kong, let alone the smaller ports.[23] This appears to have resulted from a combination of the cost involved in moving between ports and poor expectations of the sanitary and social conditions in most treaty ports. Edward Barraclough recorded that during his time as a Lieutenant Commander on the China Station it was common for servicemen to go for two or three years without seeing their wives. Indeed, he was lucky that his wife decided to stay in Hong Kong, but they still went eleven months at one point

[18] Diary of Marine W.J. Greenland, June 1926, RMM, 1978/48b.
[19] Rear-Admiral Cameron to Vice Admiral Tyrwhitt, 21 March 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[20] Unpublished memoirs of Ordinary Seaman G.T. Weekes, IWM, Documents.1445.
[21] Interview with I.L. Wight, 1982, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 6196, Reel 2, 4 minutes.
[22] Lindgren, 'A station in transition', 467-473.
[23] Admiral Pound, Memoranda on the strategic deployment of the fleet, 23 October 1923, TNA, ADM 116/3195.

without meeting. Even the major ocean-going warships would only spend a few months of the year at Hong Kong, with Yangtze gunboat crews having to suffice with shorter periods at Shanghai. While officers had some influence over where they were sent, a shortage of fully-paid deployments meant few took the risk of questioning an appointment.[24] Barraclough did also note, however, that some officers enjoyed the freedom and behaved very badly as husbands during their East Asian commissions, although he believed only a few marriages collapsed as a result.[25]

As a result of the combination of those factors, staffing the gunboat patrols generally fell upon young, junior officers, providing them with an opportunity to gain experience in command.[26] Despite that selling point, those junior officers who had better connections often sought out postings aboard the major warships on the station, or even at the shore facilities, which gave them more frequent opportunities to catch the attention of their superiors. This could even extend to civilian roles, such as filling in as a temporary private secretary to Hong Kong's governor, if the officer had sufficient influence.[27] While gunboat commanders were afforded unusually high levels of independence for junior officers in the 1920s Navy, being posted to lead just twenty-four men aboard HMS *Woodlark* or *Woodcock* on the upper Yangtze in particular was not interpreted as a positive career development. In multiple letters to his mother, Commander Paul Berryman complained about being posted to command Britain's presence on the upper river, stating in one 'I am not looking forward to my 2 (sic) years out here at all'.[28] Indeed, tracing the careers of those officers who commanded Yangtze gunboats during the 1920s reveals that very few achieved promotion to captain major warships or secured senior roles within the Admiralty later in their careers. A cursory investigation suggests that a similar situation existed in the decade or two leading up to 1914, although some officers who commanded the early destroyers operating on the lower Yangtze and around the Pearl River Delta did reach senior command, most notably Roger Keyes and Gerald Dickens.[29] Joseph Moretz perhaps offers an explanation for this variation, highlighting how many junior officers gained practical command experience

[24] Farquharson-Roberts, *Royal Navy Officers from War to War*, pp.37-38, 75.
[25] Barraclough, *I was sailing*, p.64.
[26] Unpublished autobiography of G.C. Dickens, Chapter two.
[27] Diary of Commander C.H. Drage, November 1923, IWM, PP/MCR/99, Vol. 4 (1923-1926).
[28] Letters from Commander Berryman to his mother, August and September 1926, IWM, Documents.1445.
[29] Unpublished autobiography of G.C. Dickens, Chapter two; Man and Lun, *Eastern Fortress*, p.51.

during the First World War.[30] Against that background, it may be that the experience on offer when serving on China's rivers in the 1920s was less valuable for career development than it had been in previous years.

Of course, with so many officers passing through the command there were exceptions. Antony Pugsley later referred to his time as a Lieutenant aboard the small gunboat HMS *Widgeon* as 'a vivid and enthralling experience', as an early step in his relatively successful career in the Navy, later retiring as a Rear Admiral. [31] Moreover, with the Royal Navy heavily over-staffed in the aftermath of the First World War, a posting of any sort was better than being left in reserve.[32] Gunboat service might not have been many officers' preferred choice, but it still gave them a chance of developing a career in the Navy. Of the three officers commanding *Widgeon* during Pugsley's time aboard, however, two quit the Service shortly after their China tour, with the third injured during the Wanxian Incident and forced to retire.

Late-Victorian gunboat commanders appear to have understood their role, in implementing gunboat diplomacy, as needing to display diligently the dignity demanded of a Royal Navy officer and therefore a gentleman. They were expected to be firm with local Chinese officials, but had confidence that aggression was not generally required, nor desirable, in obtaining a resolution in Britain's favour.[33] Causing skirmishes over minor disputes was seen as beneath the dignity of an officer belonging to the world's most powerful navy. Captain Dickens recounted, that in negotiating the release of an impounded British steamer in 1907, he knew that significant reinforcements were on the way and that his Chinese counterpart was also interested in finding a relatively quick and peaceful resolution.[34] Dickens believed that had he been direct and aggressive, demanding the steamer's immediate release, then the Chinese official would have felt pressured to respond with a similar tone. Dickens' thought process was framed by an unfettered belief in the supremacy of the Royal Navy and that if he chose to fight then there would be only one victor. Even during a heated protest at Hankou in January 1911, when underlying anti-foreign sentiment erupting to the surface,

[30] Moretz, *Thinking Wisely, Planning Boldly*, pp.53-54.
[31] Pugsley and Macintyre, *Destroyer Man*, pp.10-19.
[32] Moretz, *Thinking Wisely, Planning Boldly*, pp.98-99.
[33] Lieutenant-Commander Todd to Vice Admiral Moore, 17 July 1907, TNA, ADM 125/127.
[34] Unpublished autobiography of G.C. Dickens, Chapter two.

the initial attempt by the British commander was to try to calm the situation and withdraw his sailors to the riverside. After some of the seamen were knocked down by protestors, however, there was no hesitation in opening fire to re-assert control, killing thirty to forty Chinese civilians in the process.[35] Employing lethal force was not a concern in itself, but a Royal Navy officer was not expected to require using violence against what was regarded by the Service as a markedly inferior opponent.

The mind-set focused upon maintaining a dignified approach extended well beyond just the use of violence. Indeed, one enthusiastic gunboat commander who had taken to firing off rockets and fireworks to impress the local population in a friendly, almost celebratory manner was quietly scolded by his colleagues for acting in a manner unbecoming of the Royal Navy.[36] Late-Victorian gunboat diplomacy at its most basic, however, was the maintenance of an underlying threat of violence, but with the officers involved generally behaving as diplomats, seeking to avoid actually using force. In any event, the day-to-day reality for Royal Navy servicemen was a monotonous one. The China Station's gunboat flotilla was not somewhere a junior officer could secure advancement, but if a flashpoint was mishandled it would certainly impede their careers. That situation and relationship was maintained until the start of the First World War, when the demand for experienced naval personnel led to the temporary suspension of most gunboat operations in China. During the war gunboats did re-appear in service around the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia. The majority of the new Insect-class vessels, constructed for those duties, were then sent to China with the return to peace in Europe and formed the backbone of the Yangtze force.[37]

The failed attempt at returning to pre-war ways

In contrast to the decades before the First World War, the 1920s China Station was increasingly a hotbed of action for the Royal Navy. Nowhere else during the period was there such an active deployment as along China's coastline and rivers. While day-to-day life on the Station retained its pre-war simplicity, with much time still spent re-painting the gunboats and playing sport, there was a new unpredictable air of danger.[38] The breakdown

[35] Salkeld, 'Witness to the Revolution', 126. Salkeld notes that the initial figures reported in the newspapers and sent to London was only five dead, but in reality the figure was higher.
[36] Unpublished autobiography of G.C. Dickens, Chapter two.
[37] Konstam, *Yangtze River Gunboats*, Appendix.
[38] General Letters from the China Station, 1922-1924, TNA, ADM 1/8665/142.

in order resulting from the Xinhai Revolution, an influx of modern weaponry, and the growth in nationalist, anti-imperialist ideologies all removed the relative safety that Royal Navy warships had previously enjoyed. The first signs of this were apparent between the break-down in order in 1911 and 1914, but the Navy had been increasingly distracted at that point by the European march to war.[39] For a generation of officers who had experienced during the First World War the first major naval engagements since Nelson, 1920s China presented the possibility of a little more action. There were occasional crises in the Middle East and elsewhere around the Empire, but no other region presented such a likelihood of being able to make a name for themselves as the China Station.[40] Service aboard remote China gunboats might not have been a sought-after posting, but a rare chance of independent command did appeal to some officers.[41] If an officer was likely to be placed in charge of a small warship, a location where they had a few opportunities to raise their profile through action was better than being side-lined on quieter assignments elsewhere.

Entering the 1920s there was a greater risk that gunboats might become involved in firefights when sailing along China's waterways, either with bandits or through cases of mistaken identity with warlord forces. For the first few years of the decade, however, violent incidents involving Royal Navy warships remained almost as rare as before the First World War. The pirates and bandits operating on or by the waterways were generally sensible enough not to start a fight with a well-armed warship.[42] In return, the instructions issued by the Admiralty to the Commander-in-Chief of the China Station emphasised that pre-war spirit of aloofness. The Admiral was told to impress upon his officers that they should be respectful of the Chinese population, as causing offence by heavy handedness was expected to weaken China's respect for the British Empire, rather than enhance it.[43] The potential threat nonetheless required the Royal Navy to divert more time and resources to policing the waterways, responding to acts of piracy, and deterring warlord armies from fighting in the Treaty Ports.

[39] Salkeld, 'Witness to the Revolution', 116-135.
[40] Moretz, *The Royal Navy and the Capital Ship*, pp.258-259.
[41] Farquharson-Roberts, *Royal Navy Officers from War to War*, p.12.
[42] Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 11 October 1923, TNA, ADM 1/8665/142.
[43] Instructions re-issued to the Commander in Chief of the China Station, 1 Feb 1922, TNA, ADM 1/8727/146.

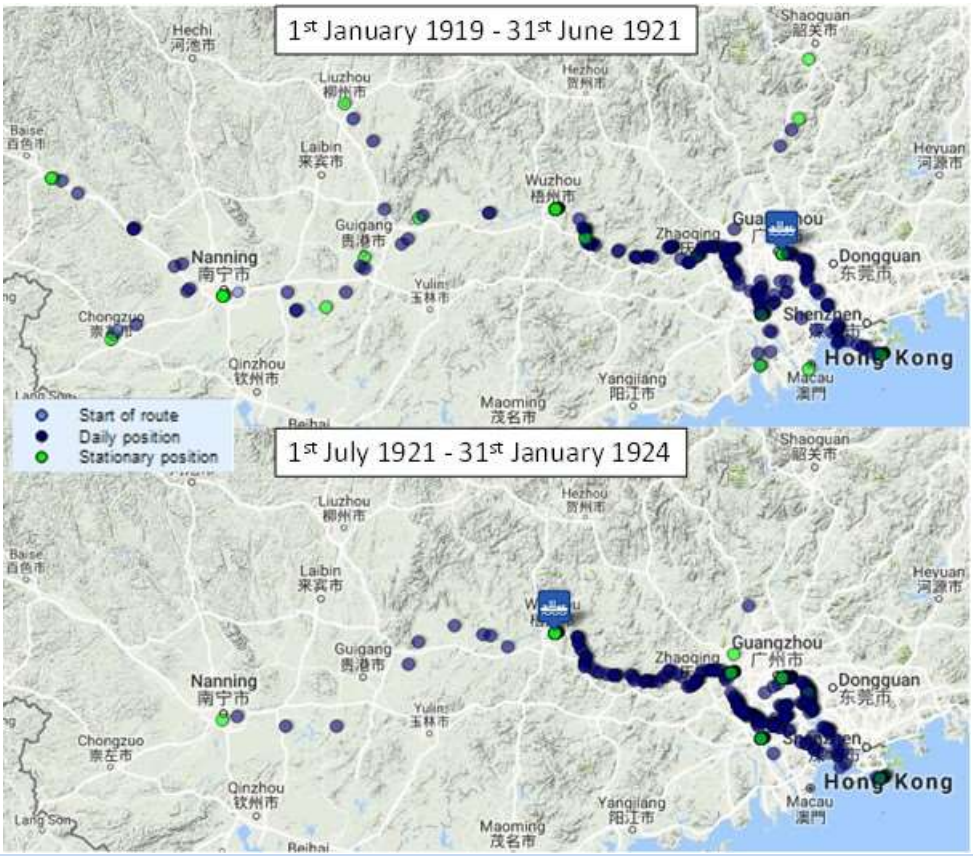
The accounts by Royal Navy personnel on service in China gradually changed in tone as a result of conducting more frequent, higher-risk tasks. Whereas those who served before the Xinhai Revolution referred to gunboat duty as having been a generally quiet assignment, those in the early 1920s indicate some degree of excitement from the disruptions to an otherwise sedate deployment. The then Lieutenant Commander Reginald Ramsbotham later recalled that China was a lively location, as 'we were always shooting off to a place where the Consuls wanted a bit of pressure put on.'[44] Pressure did not always equate to violence, however, with HMS *Bluebell* using a night-time display of its searchlights, Very lights, and a rocket to allude to its power during one such trip to Wenzhou in June 1924.[45] So busy were the Yangtze gunboats that in 1923 Admiral Arthur Leveson felt it necessary to take men off the cruiser *Carlisle* and supply ship *Titania* to re-commission the gunboat *Cricket,* which was being held in reserve at Shanghai.[46]

Growing pressure on the gunboats to tackle the piracy problem also saw the first retrenchment in the China Station's presence in China during this early period, although mainly around the Pearl River basin. Upon resuming full peacetime operations in late 1918 into early 1919, British gunboats returned to making journeys to a wide range of ports around Guangdong and even far into Guangxi province. Within eighteen months, however, their deployment shifted to concentrate upon a much smaller number of waterways, primarily the West River downstream of Wuzhou, around Guangzhou. There are no suggestions in the China Station's correspondence that this was originally meant to be a permanent change. However, given Britain's weakening position in China and its volatile relationship with the Guomindang, the ruling force in Guangdong, the Royal Navy rarely ventured back upriver after 1922. This change can be seen particularly clearly in the movements of HMS *Moorhen,* which visited cities far inland at Baituzhen, Chongzuo, Liuzhou, and Napozhen between January 1919 and June 1921.[47] In contrast, from July 1921 onwards *Moorhen's* activities were largely restricted to the area around Guangzhou. It only made one solitary journey beyond Wuzhou, to Nanning, in the following two and a half

[44] Unpublished memoirs of Captain Ramsbotham.
[45] Diary of Commander C.H. Drage, Vol. 4 (1923-1926).
[46] Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 11 October 1923, TNA, ADM 1/8665/142.
[47] Ship's log books of HMS *Moorhen* May 1919, TNA, ADM 53/49912-49938 and ADM 53/80939-80955.

years (see Figure 14).[48] This trend was particularly pronounced in *Moorhen's* case, but can be seen with the other Royal Navy gunboats assigned to patrol the Pearl River basin.

Figure 14: Patrols by HMS *Moorhen* 1919-24[49]



For ordinary seamen the tasks associated with the Navy's counter-piracy policing work seem to have proven quite enjoyable. HMS *Carlisle's* regular night patrols of Daya Bay provided some low-risk action, with the warship stalking suspect Chinese junks in the dark, then boarding and searching them when they could not get away. In one case the crew was entertained when they discovered some known gangsters hiding in coffins, with *Carlisle* radioing the Hong Kong police to take charge of the suspects.[50] Guard duty aboard merchant steamers also provided freedom from normal duties and the opportunity to socialise with the passengers.

[48] E.g. General Letters from the China Station, 1922-24, TNA ADM 1/8665/142; Proceedings of the China Station, 1924-1925, TNA, ADM 116/2262; General Letters from the China Station, 1926-1927, TNA, ADM 116/2502; Proceedings of the China Station, 1929-1930, TNA, ADM 116/2694.
[49] Courtesy of Journey Plotter and Naval-History.net, https://www.journeyplotter.nl/index.html, last accessed 21 May 2018.
[50] Interview with A.A. Heron, 1975, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 681, Reel 11, 7-10 minutes.

Anti-piracy work, however, was less popular with the officers, with many treating it with the same distain that Admiral Bridge had regarded the responsibilities of his gunboat force almost twenty years earlier. Admiral Leveson complained in 1924, for example, that there was little his gunboats could do to prevent acts of piracy and he felt pressure should be placed on searching passengers in harbour instead.[51] Instead, many officers felt that the Royal Navy should be focusing on seeking out and destroying pirate 'nests' and vessels, with hijacking a matter for the civil authorities. Changes in the understanding of what the duties were, or at least should be, for the China gunboats started to become particularly obvious in late 1923, going into 1924.

After protection money was demanded from the British-flagged steamer *San Ming* on the West River in January 1924, HMS *Robin* sought out a suspected pirate vessel and opened fire upon it with the gunboat's main 6" gun, after the junk failed to stop. Five suspected pirates were killed in the process, after a shell hit the ship's boiler causing a large explosion. A total of seventeen high explosive shells were fired during the mid-afternoon chase.[52] Both *Robin's* Lieutenant Commander Lionel Tudway and the Senior Naval Officer on the West River, Commander Malcolm Maxwell-Scott, argued that it was only through such firm actions that pirates would be dissuaded from attempting to attack or extort money from British merchant vessels.[53] Strong anti-piracy patrols were not in themselves unique to gunboat diplomacy as a strategy, but the consideration and use of raiding shore parties made the approach different from ordinary counter piracy work. Through those raids, Britain was attempting to make the statement that it would ignore Chinese sovereignty to protect its interests and force local officials to do more, even if there was no effective nationwide government to take notice. Whether the tactics worked was another matter, as Tudway himself discovered four months later after he was shot through the thigh, when *Robin* was targeted by gunmen on the same stretch of river.[54]

It was shortly after those reports, during the summer of 1924, that the situation started to really change for the China Station. The Jiangsu-Zhejiang conflict and Second Zhili-Fengtian War both brought greater risk of Britain being caught up in the fighting between warlord

[51] Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 23 January 1924, TNA, ADM 1/8665/142.
[52] Ship's log of HMS *Robin* January 1925, TNA, ADM 53/82919.
[53] HMS *Tarantula* to Admiral Leveson, 5 March 1924, TNA, ADM 116/2262.
[54] Diary of Commander C.H. Drage, 30 May 1924, Vol. 4 (1923-26).

armies, which coincided with a surge in pirate attacks across the south of China.[55] As an indication of the threat posed by the fighting, in September 1924 an 8,000 strong army led by General Lu Yongxiang retreated on Shanghai and attempted to seek refuge in the International Settlement, with their weapons. As the SVC only maintained on-paper strength of 1,695 men, a further 1,800 sailors and marines were landed from the warships in harbour. In addition, the SMP and Fire Brigade were mobilised as a further impromptu defensive group. On paper that formed a total make-shift force of roughly 5,500 armed or semi-armed men, although in practice only a lower number could be relied upon. SVC records highlight that many volunteers were either not always present in Shanghai or were reluctant participants, with even the annual ceremonial parade struggling to reach 1,000 attendees.[56] Nonetheless, the scale of that mobilisation was unprecedented in the history of Shanghai's International Settlement, although it would soon be overtaken.

The growing combined threat from conflict and piracy precipitated a subtle change in the Royal Navy's gunboat strategy, with hawks like the commander of HMS *Robin* coming to the fore. Even as late as the previous year British gunboats had generally ignored the occasional shots aimed at them when sailing along the West River.[57] In contrast, 1924 saw a number of the China Station's gunboats using their main guns in shore bombardments against reported pirate groups, although this generally occurred when they were working in combination with forces commanded by local Chinese generals and admirals.[58] Cases of mistaken identity also crept in, with Yunnanese troops targeting *Robin* as it sailed along the West River in June, resulting in the British gunboat returning fire with its machine guns.[59] Gunboat diplomacy was no longer a passive day-to-day deterrent reinforced by odd moments of severe violence, and the first signs of its ultimate crisis were emerging.

The impact of the May Thirtieth Incident

The mid-1920s saw a return to an earlier incarnation and probably the purest form of gunboat diplomacy, in response to Britain's deteriorating position in China. The main

[55] Jackson, 'Expansion and defence', p.191.
[56] Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1924, SMA, U1-1-937; Shanghai Municipal Council Annual Report 1922, SMA, U1-1-935.
[57] Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 17 March 1923, TNA, ADM 1/8665/142.
[58] Various reports from Admiral Leveson to Admiralty, 1924, TNA, ADM 1/8665/142.
[59] Commodore Grace to Admiral Leveson, 10 June 1924, TNA, ADM 1/8665/142.

catalyst for that decline was the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925, when British-led police shot and killed twelve protestors. With nascent concepts of nationalism in China stiffened by anti-foreign rhetoric in the aftermath of that incident, politicised groups were increasingly willing to challenge the representatives of British imperialism.[60] Even more significantly, the growing sense of commonality between cities and regions, fostered by rising nationalist sentiment, meant that potential clashes were now unlikely to pass as localised affairs. In the aftermath of the May Thirtieth Incident and subsequent clashes, anti-British protests and boycotts spread quickly across many other Treaty Ports.[61] Indeed, there were even small anti-imperial protests as far away as Sydney in Australia, organised in solidarity by a few unions.[62] News travelled much faster than it had done previously and could create storms far and wide.

The growing contagion effect was significant for the Royal Navy, as previously the restricted application of force by gunboats could be used in a quasi-surgical manner to deal with issues at specific locations. In such situations, the Navy could easily achieve a localised monopoly of violence. If protests and clashes could spread nationwide as a result, however, the limited resources available on the China Station could never maintain that largely illusory threat of overwhelming force. Indeed, a June 1925 situation report to the Committee for Imperial Defence stated explicitly: '…it is unlikely that we shall be able to strengthen our naval forces commensurate with possible developments.'[63] That challenge particularly applied to the riverine ports, inaccessible by the China Station's larger warships, where at times the Navy might only be able to deploy a single gunboat or armed merchantman carrying a handful of marines.

The change in environment did not initially produce a fundamental re-assessment of which tactics should be used by Britain's warships in China. Nor were any efforts made to transfer the Navy's two remaining spare gunboats at Malta, which could have provided a modest boost to the China Station's littoral capabilities. Curiously, the Admiralty failed even to acknowledge their existence during discussions with the Foreign Office, who were pressing

[60] Bickers, *Empire Made Me,* pp.164-168.
[61] Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat*, pp.40-50.
[62] Sophie Loy-Wilson, '"Liberating" Asia: Strikes and Protest in Sydney and Shanghai, 1920-39', *History Workshop Journal* 72, (2011), 74-102.
[63] Summary memorandum on the Situation in China, 30 June 1925, TNA, CAB 24/174/26.

strongly for a strengthening of Britain's riverine forces in China.[64] This failure reflects the long-standing reluctance among senior officers to put their energy into what they saw as a peripheral imperial policing task. Indeed, the contrasting redeployment of the aircraft carrier HMS *Hermes* to Hong Kong in August suggests that the Navy's priorities lay with the major coastal ports.[65] Overall, there remained a belief that a few displays Royal Navy firepower would be sufficient to remind the Chinese that Britain was the superpower. Indeed, it appears that the growing anti-foreign sentiment only furthered the existing trend towards a gradual hardening of gunboat tactics, with hawkish British commanders increasingly free to use their guns.

On June 23, for example, HMS *Cicala* put a landing party ashore on Shamian Island in Guangzhou, taking the lead in defending foreign possessions in the city, during anti-foreign protests resulting from the May Thirtieth Incident.[66] The island was separated by a 100 foot wide canal, but was connected to the shore by two small bridges. There are conflicting accounts about what happened as the Chinese protestors reached the western crossing, shots were reportedly fired, which triggered a subsequent exchange of gunfire. Sir James Jamieson, the British Consul General, later claimed that he had seen Whampoa Academy cadets open fire first, but even if true the response was disproportionate.[67] That is not certain, however, as Chinese eye witnesses swore that gunfire first erupted from Shamian Island itself, i.e. the foreign forces.[68] In the violence that ensued, over fifty Chinese protestors and one French marine died, with many more injured.[69] Only after twenty minutes did Lieutenant Commander Victor Alleyne order the international forces to cease fire. Highlighting the intensity of the event, the unfortunate Petty Officer signalling the order with his whistle was shot through both hands.[70] The incident became known as the 'Shaji Masssacre'.

[64] Foreign Office memoranda on the situation in China, June 1925, TNA, FO 371/10922.
[65] Ship's log of HMS *Hermes* 1925-1926, TNA, ADM 53/78829.
[66] Report on the events at Shamian (Shameen) Island, June 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8070/219.
[67] T'ang Leang Li, *The Inner History of the Chinese Revolution*, (Arlington: University Publications of America, 1975), pp.207-208.
[68] *China Mail*, 27 June 1925, p.2.
[69] Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism 1900-1949,* (Manchester: MUP, 1999), p.4; Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain in Shanghai*, p.16; Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue*, p.52.
[70] Rear-Admiral Anderson to the Admiralty, 12 October 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8707/219.

The British Lieutenant in charge of the Lewis machinegun party that caused many of the casualties, Cyril Faure, appears to have been instrumental in the scale of the violence. Faure is reported to have reacted very badly in the weeks before the incident to criticism from the Foreign Office, for breaking the prohibition on landing British personnel on Chinese soil during a joint Anglo-Chinese anti-piracy raid near Jiangmen (Kongmoon) the previous month. While Faure also received praise, including from General Leung who commanded the raid, his behaviour changed markedly as a result. He started getting a reputation for being drunk and disorderly on duty, with some incidents sufficiently bad to be recorded in his personnel file. This was in stark contrast to reports from previous years, when he was described as an intelligent and diligent young officer. There is no clear evidence that alcohol played a part in his actions at Shamian, but in the immediate aftermath his immediate superior Commander Maxwell-Scott recorded that Faure had become 'liable to get excited' and that a 'grievance seems to be affecting his balance'.[71] In contrast, every report about Alleyne, who had overall command at Guangzhou, indicates he was a tactful and trustworthy officer, who was skilled at calming tense situations.[72]

Despite subsequently being rotated into alternative roles, drunkenness affected Faure's actions so heavily by 1928 that he was suspended from duty, and forced to retire, with Admiral Reginald Tyrwhitt simply writing '<u>Not</u> recommended' on his file.[73] The following year a businessman who met Faure described him as being clearly very intelligent, but prone to drunkenness, inclined to blame his failures on others, and held grudges against those he believed to have undermined him, particularly the Foreign Office.[74] Curiously, in 1934 the by then retired Faure was cautiously used by SIS's Hong Kong branch, although his employment was soon terminated with the assessment; 'One does not expect SIS agents to be saints, but… Lt Cdr Faure is well below the line which must be drawn'.[75] That Faure and his men opened fire at Shamian was a reflection of the Navy's increasingly aggressive stance, and Alleyne would probably have reacted the same way. Alleyne had after all issued

[71] Personnel file of Lieutenant Cyril Faure, TNA, ADM 196/122/80; Personnel file of Lieutenant Cyril Faure, TNA, ADM 196/146/649.
[72] Reports about Alleyne by Commodores Bowden-Smith, Grace, and Stirling, 1922-1925, TNA, ADM 196/144/50.
[73] Personnel file of Lieutenant Cyril Faure, TNA, ADM 196/122/80; Personnel file of Lieutenant Cyril Faure, TNA, ADM 196/146/649.
[74] Character reference about Cyril Faure by G.S. Moss, 31 December 1929, TNA, WO 106/5270.
[75] Letter from MI2 General Staff officer at Hong Kong, 13 September 1934, TNA, WO 106/5270.

the overall order for armed men to be sent ashore, despite his reputation for calming situations. In this sense, Harumi Goto-Shibata's description of an 'atmosphere of fear' among the foreign force is at least partly accurate.[76] It seems probable that the high number of casualties those British sailors caused, however, may have been a tragic consequence of the rapid and sad decline in Faure's mental health.

Writing in *The Naval Review* after his retirement, Faure offered what reads as a short, half-hearted effort to restore his reputation, which does little to change this assessment of his actions. In doing so, he blamed the Chinese authorities in Guangzhou, the armed volunteers under his supervision, and the Foreign Office for denying him an inquiry that he felt would have vindicated his actions. Given the brevity of his argument, supported by very limited evidence, and some rather grandiose claims made later in the article about his connections among China's elites, Faure does not make a particularly convincing case.[77] Indeed, the vague allusions to a conspiracy, his avoidance of taking any personal responsibility, attacks on Foreign Office Consul O'Malley's intelligence, and hints at delusions of grandeur, the account tends to add credence to suggestions that Faure was a young man who had come off the rails.

Official guidelines, such as those Faure fell foul of, were in place to limit what the Navy's warship commanders were allowed to do in response to violence in China. In that case, British service personnel were not meant to be landed on Chinese soil, without prior express permission from Chinese officials.[78] It seems that the Foreign Office felt that General Leung was insufficiently senior to authorise the incursion, and Faure had exceeded his own orders by setting men ashore, rather than simply providing naval support for the Chinese troops. Even at the Treaty Ports, written restrictions were imposed on when sailors or marines could be landed at times of crisis.[79] For the Royal Navy, gunboat diplomacy had rarely been about placing boots on the ground and so those limitations meant little in practice.

Difficulties in defining what forms of intervention were considered acceptable, and advisable, extended up the full line of command. In August 1925, for example, Vice Admiral

[76] Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain in Shanghai*, p.16.
[77] C.M. Faure, 'Some Aspects of the China Situation', *The Naval Review* 16/4 (1928), pp.659-660.
[78] Admiralty correspondence regarding the use of force in China, 1925-1927, TNA, ADM 116/2527.
[79] Hansard, 15 July 1925, vol. 186, c.1303.

Edwyn Alexander-Sinclair - the new Commander in Chief of the China Station – proposed a plan to the Admiralty to bombard the Taku Forts near Tianjin and the Whampoa Military Academy near Guangzhou. He felt that such strong displays in two pivotal locations would break the anti-British boycott.[80] In London, the Director of Naval Operations, Captain Ambrose Peck, suggested aircraft from *Hermes* could bombard the picket lines near Guangzhou instead, but he questioned whether such forceful action would be sensible given the reported conditions in China.[81] While ultimately Whitehall sided with Peck's caution and did not authorise Sinclair's plans, the exchange does highlight the aggressive spirit developing at the head of the China Station. Sinclair sensibly chose to act in line with the guidance from London, in contrast to Faure's unfortunate decision that went beyond what he was authorised to do. For the command as a whole, however, emphasis was shifting from 'observe and coerce' to 'intervene and punish'. The Navy's culture towards command at the time also meant that most day-to-day decisions were left to Vice Admiral Sinclair, as he was the man on the spot, although he should do so 'in communication with the diplomatic and consular authorities.'[82]

It is important to note that despite the shifting mentality, the majority of cases in late 1925 where gunboats were sent to ports experiencing strikes, protests, or boycotts, continued to pass relatively peacefully. In his final report as the Senior Naval Officer on the Yangtze in October, Rear Admiral David Anderson commended numerous officers who had responded to such situations in a calm and restrained manner. HMS *Gnat,* for example, had shore parties ashore at Jiujiang for three weeks, during a two-and-a-half-month spell at the port, without a single clash occurring. Likewise, *Bluebell* and *Foxglove* both quietly avoided provoking violent clashes at Shantou in August, despite breaking a ferryman strike by providing cross-river transportation.[83] *Bluebell* also sent a shore party into Nanjing during fighting between Chinese armies there in October 1925, but sufficient restraint and good sense was shown that the local population reportedly gave them a friendly send-off when they departed in December.[84] Whether or not that report is true, the only physical damage done by British action during the course of that potential crisis came from the flooding of

[80] Admiral Sinclair to Admiralty, 21 August 1925, TNA, FO 371/10947.
[81] Memorandum by Captain Peck, 22 August 1925, TNA, FO 371/10947.
[82] Committee of Imperial Defence meeting notes on the situation in China, June 1925, TNA, CAB 24/174/26.
[83] Acting-Consul Davidson to Admiral Sinclair, August 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8707/219.
[84] Diary of Commander C.H. Drage, November 1923, Vol. 4 (1923-1926).

the officers' bathroom aboard HMS *Concord,* due to the speed at which it steamed to *Bluebell's* assistance. In contrast, Lieutenant Anthony Pugsley of HMS *Widgeon* was deliberately omitted from Anderson's report, despite being soundly praised by the local British officials at Chongqing. Anderson was displeased that Pugsley's uncompromising approach had come close to sparking a riot.[85] Certainly it was not an episode that Pugsley wished to mention in his memoirs, although he did discuss the difficulty involved with balancing the use of force during such incidents.[86]

The command culture of the China Station remained that of the Victorian navy, with commanders allowed considerable independence in deciding how to interpret and go about fulfilling their orders. Indeed, between mid-1925 and late-1926 the China Station was under the command of Vice-Admiral Sinclair, whose distant style of leadership meant that his thoughts on which tactics should be used remained a 'mystery' to his subordinates.[87] Indeed, Sinclair replaced Rear-Admiral Allan Everett who had relinquished command in April 1925 due to ill health having suffered a mental breakdown during his short tenure in charge.[88] In the absence of clear instructions over that two-year combined period, individual commanders were almost entirely left to follow their own instincts. That freedom, combined with the heated atmosphere in China and the growing bellicose spirit around the China Station, and Sinclair's own aggressive proposals, soon contributed to the set of developments that in part led to the final crisis of gunboat diplomacy.

A double crisis – gunboat diplomacy living up to its reputation

While the crisis that ultimately brought about a fundamental change in Britain's approach in China did not occur until late 1926, as the Northern Expedition neared the Yangtze, the tactical crisis of how the Royal Navy should conduct gunboat diplomacy began much earlier that year. Even during the tense times of 1925, most violent incidents involving the Royal Navy had tended to be reactive situations, or with some degree of official Chinese acquiescence. In particular, when gunboats or marines opened fire as a result of events ashore spiralling out of control. The Navy often played a role in the developing course of

[85] Rear-Admiral Anderson to Admiralty, 12 October 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8707/219; Acting-Consul Archer to Rear Admiral Anderson, July 1925, TNA, ADM 1/8707/219.
[86] Pugsley and Macintyre, *Destroyer Man,* pp.10-19.
[87] Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-1928, NMM, HTN 214.
[88] Journal of Lieutenant William Andrewes, 18 April 1925, IWM, DS/MISC/12.

those events and threats of violence were not uncommon, but there was far more bluster than bite.

In June 1924, for example, Lieutenant Commander Ivan Whitehorn of HMS *Cockchafer* took a retaliatory attitude to the killing of an American businessman, Edwin Hawley, after the latter had been in an argument with port workers in Wanxian.[89] Amid threats by Whitehorn to bombard the port, the local Chinese commander General Lu ordered the execution of two men accused of committing the murder. During the entire incident only a single blank shell was fired in order to disperse a crowd before the landing of a small shore party to recover Hawley's body. At no point during the events did *Cockchafer* perform a main gun drill, which was normal practice when there was a possibility they might be used. Likewise, after initially being put on alert for the five hours of the evening of Hawley's killing, *Cockchafer's* crew returned to ordinary cleaning duties the following morning.[90] Neither of those individual factors is conclusive, but when combined with the thin precedence for bombarding a city over an incident involving a non-British national, it seems likely that the threat was just a bluff, but we will never know for certain. Even then, there was pressure on the Navy from the Foreign Office for Whitehorn to face a court martial, on the grounds of grossly exceeding his orders. As no live shells were fired, and amid positive statements from the American community, no proceedings were opened into the incident. Over the following year, Whitehorn's perceived 'gamble' with his career and the Foreign Office's attitude became major talking points among the Yangtze gunboat officers.[91]

The events that unfolded two years later at Wanxian, in September 1926, provide an example of how much the interpretation of how to conduct gunboat diplomacy had shifted over the course of the 1920s. In the summer months of 1926, General Yang Sen - the warlord Governor of Sichuan Province - and his army around Wanxian were increasingly under pressure from forces participating in the Northern Expedition, during their push towards the Yangtze. Faced with that threat, Yang Sen's men started to challenge the neutrality of foreign shipping by demanding that merchant vessels transport units along the river. British merchantmen had previously provided such transport in return for lucrative

[89] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* pp.82-84.
[90] Ship's log of HMS *Cockchafer* June 1924*,* TNA, ADM 53/73583.
[91] Pugsley and Macintyre, *Destroyer Man,* p.13.

fees, despite strict instructions from the Foreign Office not to do so. This precipitated a crisis in September, when Chinese troops aboard the Butterfield & Swires steamer *Wanliu* demanded transport, only to be removed with the assistance of HMS *Cockchafer.* While this was happening, *Cockchafer's* wake led to a number of Chinese junks being swamped with some of their occupants drowning. In the events that followed, Chinese troops were ordered to seize control of two other British merchantmen, *Wantung* and *Wanhsien,* by General Yang Sen.[92] During similar circumstances in 1907, the Royal Navy assembled a response force, but the officers on the scene focused on negotiating a peaceful release of the steamers, which they duly achieved.[93] At Wanxian nineteen years later, however, both the approach taken and the end result were wildly different.

While Consul General A.P. Blunt started to negotiate for the release of the steamers, the Royal Navy assembled a 'cutting-out' party at Hankou, intended to sail to Wanxian and seize back the two vessels.[94] Within four days of the seizure of the vessels, and twenty-four hours after receiving the first official report from his subordinates on the scene, Rear Admiral John Cameron dispatched the armed merchantman *Kiawo*. Captained by Commander Frederick Darley, the *Kiawo* contained 120 sailors and marines.[95] In the words of his fictional counterpart, Jack Aubrey, it appears Cameron felt that there was 'not a moment to be lost'. Deriving its name from the process of severing a stationary vessel's anchor or mooring lines, the 'cutting-out' of large ships was an approach usually reserved for wartime. The confusion of boarding vessels held by an opposing armed force, particularly when done without the element of surprise, was a process almost certain to result in casualties. Given that Cameron knew Chinese troops were occupying the two merchantmen, and so a direct clash was likely, his decision stands out when compared with the China Station's normal reliance upon coercive threats. Cameron later reported that he had given instructions that the Chinese forces should be notified that if the British warships were fired upon from the city itself Darley was authorised to reply with the gunboats' 6" main guns. That direct threat never

[92] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* p.69.
[93] Unpublished autobiography of G.C. Dickens, Chapter two.
[94] Tweedie, *The Story of a Naval Life*, p.241.
[95] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* p.102.

reached General Yang Sen, but the associated order did reach Darley and the other gunboat commanders, with tragic consequences.[96]

Cameron's fateful decision was not made with a measured understanding of what it would mean for gunboat diplomacy in China. Indeed, his decision was made with limited knowledge of what had actually occurred, since the report he received from Lieutenant Commander Leon Acheson aboard *Cockchafer* was highly exaggerated.[97] What Cameron did not know was that Commander Acheson and General Yang Sen did not get along well, and their attempts at negotiation amounted to little more than exchanging personal insults.[98] Yang Sen reportedly had a strong personality and Acheson's personal record suggests that while a popular sportsman among his fellow officers, he was 'inclined to be obstinate… (and) wanting in tact'.[99] Acheson had also been the officer in command of *Cockchafer* when it had assisted the *Wanliu* and in so doing had drowned some of Yang Sen's men at the start of the incident. Subsequent negotiations led by Commander Paul Berryman of the newly arrived HMS *Widgeon* were then hampered by the profound negativity resulting from the early exchanges, and occurred only after Darley and *Kiawo* had already been ordered up river.[100] Berryman had only taken up his role as Senior Naval Officer on the Upper Yangtze in mid-August, and his negotiations were further hampered by his lack of knowledge about what was occurring, given how fresh he was to the region.[101] The events that unfolded as a result of Cameron's misinformed decision, would force a change in the Royal Navy's tactics in China.

The attempted cutting-out on the 5th September was a catastrophic failure. Commander Darley and six other Royal Navy personnel died while attempting to board the two vessels. A further thirteen sailors and three of the hostages were wounded during the course of events.[102] Darley's plan had been based on a complacent, and possibly racially framed, assumption that Chinese troops would naturally lay down their arms when surprised by the

[96] Rear-Admiral Cameron to Admiral Sinclair, 17 September 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[97] Rear-Admiral Cameron to Admiral Sinclair, 17 September 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[98] Consul A.E. Eastes to Sir Ronald Macleay, 7 September 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[99] Personal file of Leon Stopford Acheson, TNA, ADM 196/144/741.
[100] Consul A.E. Eastes to Sir Ronald Macleay, 7 September 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[101] Letters by Commander Berryman to his mother, August-September 1926, IWM, Documents.18246.
[102] Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue,* p.102.

sudden appearance of British sailors.[103] Indeed, Darley and his boarding party were only armed with wooden entrenching tool handles (see Figure 15) when they first leapt aboard the SS *Wanhsien*, such was their belief that they would be largely unopposed.[104] This was reinforced by an apparently successful ruse by the Chinese troops, with some pretending to eat dinner complacently at a table on *Wanhsien's* deck before the attack. In reality, those troops were well aware that *Kiawo* was approaching and were prepared for a fight. After failing to seize back the steamers, and coming under fire from the defenders, the British gunboats returned fire towards the city, and as has previously been discussed, many shells landed in populated areas. At least 280 and potentially up to several thousand Chinese were killed, either directly or in the subsequent fires, with similarly variable estimates of the proportions of military and civilians among the dead.[105]

Figure 15: Officers of the 'cutting-out' group taken on the morning of 5 September[106]

Rear row (left to right)

Lieutenant Jack Peterson
Lieutenant Christopher Ridge (Killed)
Surgeon Lieutenant Murray (Wounded)

Front row (left to right)

Lieutenant Alfred Higgins (Killed)
Commander Frederick Darley (Killed)
Lieutenant Oliver Fogg-Elliot (Wounded)

The casualties at Wanxian alone were sufficient to precipitate a diplomatic crisis that fed into worsening Anglo-Chinese relations. For the Royal Navy, however, the events also represented a fundamental tactical and strategic failure. Cameron had deployed a force far stronger than those generally available to respond to such crises, and yet the Royal Navy had been made to appear both weak and brutal at the same time, despite efforts to portray the expedition as heroic in the British press.[107] The failed attempts at issuing direct threats of retribution if the vessels were not released were always tangential to the primary orders for the *Kiawo* expeditionary force to seize them back. Crucially, Darley's instructions were

[103] Consul A.E. Eastes to Sir Ronald Macleay, 7 September 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[104] Pugsley and Macintyre, *Destroyer Man,* p.16; Allen, *With HMS Despatch to China*, p.20.
[105] Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower*, p.200; Osterhammel, 'China', p.652.
[106] Photograph album of Major Frederick Burden RMLI, 1926, Royal Marine Museum, 1992/112/1.
[107] E.g. *Nottingham Evening Post*, 14 September 1926.

not based upon co-ordinating the Navy's actions with the local consul's efforts to force Yang Sen into yielding to British demands. Indeed, *Kiawo* only possessed a short-range wireless set, intended to notify *Cockchafer* and *Widgeon*, ahead of its imminent arrival and the impending raid.[108] How the slow-moving *Kiawo* was meant to achieve tactical surprise was left unanswered. While his account does contain some very questionable assertions, Lieutenant Pugsley later claimed that *Widgeon*, so presumably Commander Berryman, had even radioed Darley at the last minute, 'pleading' with him to change his plan as the Chinese knew of *Kiawo's* approach.[109] In all, the rash and rushed plan was both a tactical and strategic mess. Poorly co-ordinated threats, followed by a naïve attempt at using force, showed neither a considered attempt at gunboat diplomacy nor military sense. As a result, what occurred at Wanxian revealed Britain's gunboat bluff and with it dented perceptions of the Royal Navy's power among China's regional leaders and population.

Curiously, the whole incident went against Admiralty instructions in early 1926, restricting the use of gunboats on the Upper Yangtze.[110] By this point the Admiralty had already decided, in conjunction with the civil authorities, to withdraw protection from those British civilians and vessels that chose to operate in that peripheral region. The Admiralty subsequently provided retrospective approval of Cameron's decision, which had been approved by Vice Admiral Sinclair. The incident does, however, serve to highlight that the China Station's officers were taking a firm interpretation of what their responsibilities entailed. Leon Acheson's behaviour certainly adds credence to the reports highlighted by Nicholas Clifford that some naval officers were 'spoiling for a fight'.[111] While it might be assumed, given Cameron's pattern of strong action, that he may have been a cause of the hardening in gunboat behaviour, as shall be explored shortly he was actually considered to be too cautious by some of his subordinates.[112]

A disjointed strategic and tactical shift

The final months of 1926, after the Wanxian Incident, saw a fundamental change in the Navy's strategy towards and tactics in dealing with China. The strategic shift was closely

[108] Rear-Admiral Cameron to Admiral Sinclair, 17 September 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[109] Pugsley and Macintyre, *Destroyer Man,* p.17.
[110] Summary of Royal Navy actions in China, 1932, TNA, ADM1/8756/137.
[111] Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire,* p.166.
[112] Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-1928.

aligned with the diplomatic stance taken by the Foreign Office, discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, culminating with Austen Chamberlain's December Memorandum. Official policy changed to a withdrawal of resources from a wide range of Treaty Ports to focus upon the determined defence of key harbours and waterways, such as Shanghai and the Lower Yangtze. The Admiralty's proposed strategy in light of the new circumstances involved the use of warships to evacuate foreign civilians from secondary Treaty Ports when required, and to secure those of primary importance. Previously, there had been a large grey area between formal British imperial possessions and what were seen as China's sovereign rights. After the shift in late 1926, however, a dividing line had been drawn – Whitehall had effectively told the Navy that they should consider some Treaty Ports as core to the British Empire and defend them accordingly.

The message sent to the warship commanders by the strategic shift was reinforced with the rapid redeployment, in September, of the aircraft carrier HMS *Hermes* and the Third Destroyer Flotilla, both from the Mediterranean.[113] That posting was largely a response to the broader environment, given the strength of anti-British rhetoric from the Guomindang in mid-1926 and the launch of the Northern Expedition. Nonetheless, while it may have been intended to show Britain's resolve to the Chinese and British expatriate communities, it had an impact upon Royal Navy personnel as well.

A subtle example of how this influenced the Navy's tactics can be seen during trouble at Hankou, soon after the Third Destroyer Flotilla arrived on the China Station. In response to anti-foreign protests after the city was seized by the Guomindang, the senior naval commander at Hankou ordered the landing of shore parties, in much the same way that the Royal Navy had behaved in years before. Unlike previous incidents, however, the decision was made to send ashore a 2-pounder quick-fire 'Pom-Pom' anti-aircraft gun.[114] That weapon could fire approximately three high explosive shells per second at a distance of up to a kilometre, and was a significant jump from the normal rifles and machineguns issued to shore parties. Prior to 1926, there appear to be no recorded instances of the Navy landing heavy weaponry since the Boxer Rebellion, nor had they requested the assistance of the

[113] Ship's log of HMS *Hermes* 1926-1927, TNA, ADM 53/78830; Ship's log of HMS *Wild Swan* End of 1926, TNA, ADM 53/92845.
[114] Interview with A. Gaskin, 1986, IWM Interview Series, Catalogue Number 9344, Reel 6, 2mins.

treaty port volunteer corps gun batteries. The Shanghai Volunteer Corps, for example, had four 4.5" howitzers and a battery of 2.75" mountain guns, although the latter were antiquated and largely for show.[115]

Even in itself, having a heavy weapon ashore was a significant and explicit threat, greater in intensity than the implicit one posed by a gunboat mid-channel. Weighing 527lb (239kg), landing a Pom-Pom was not something ordered on a whim and doing so showed that the shore party would not surrender their position lightly. Even mounted on a wheeled carriage, a large team was required to move the weapon around.[116] As a result, it tied the shore party into making a determined defence to avoid potentially losing a valuable piece of equipment. Using land-based heavy weapons in this way went against the very essence of gunboat diplomacy, stretching the idea that it should involve a limited application of force. By defending a fixed location there was no end-goal of trying to coerce a change in behaviour by the Chinese forces.[117]

It is worth noting that the landing of the Pom-Pom occurred prior to the December Memorandum, signifying that gunboat diplomacy was already being abandoned prior to the official change in Britain's foreign policy towards China. This is an important distinction, as it would indicate that there was a grass-roots recognition within the Navy that gunboat tactics were no longer effective. The existing discussion about the decision in effect to abandon Hankou in January 1927 focuses heavily on the changing diplomatic situation and how that led to the decision not to defend the concession. Edmund Fung and Jürgen Osterhammel, for example, both argue that the realisation after Wanxian that gunboat diplomacy was failing, led to a shift in foreign policy to managed imperial retreat.[118] That would also suggest that the aggressive approach taken in early 1927 was the Royal Navy's final gunboat hurrah, before being restrained by diplomatic pressure. The decision not to defend Hankou, however, was as much a military one as a matter of foreign policy.

In the first week of January, Britain had just three vessels stationed at Hankou – the newly arrived destroyer *Woolston,* the sloop *Magnolia,* and Cameron's flagship gunboat HMS

[115] 1921 Shanghai Municipal Report, SMA, U1-1-934; 1926 Shanghai Municipal Report, SMA, U1-1-939.
[116] Photograph album of H.J. Wright, 1927, RNM, 2013/161.
[117] Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, pp.36-83.
[118] Fung, 'The Sino-British Rapprochement', 82-88; Osterhammel, 'China', p.653.

Bee.[119] Together with an additional detachment of marines, that only provided a force of roughly 300 service personnel. With southern forces assembling at Jiujiang and other treaty ports, the Yangtze gunboat force was stretched thin. On paper, the Hankou Volunteer Corps (HVC) could provide a supplementary force of 130 individuals armed with a selection of small-arms, passed on from their larger Shanghai counterpart's armoury.[120] However, as many of the foreign population had already departed, the HVC was only useful for supervising the gates to the concession. Similarly, the local municipal police consisted largely of Sikhs from India, who were demoralized, not particularly committed to the British Empire, and therefore unwilling to defend the concession.[121] As it was mid-winter, water levels on the middle and upper Yangtze were also low and dropping fast, making it difficult to move *Woolston* or arrange for any additional major warships to reinforce Hankou from Shanghai. While over the course of January it was subsequently discovered water levels were sufficient to send more destroyers up to Hankou, at the critical moment no reinforcements could be expected.[122]

In contrast to the small British outpost, there was a substantial Chinese force marching on Hankou. Cameron notified Tyrwhitt on 14 January that a Chinese army numbering roughly 12,000 men was in position around the city, with further divisions nearby around Hubei province. An earlier report, later dismissed as inaccurate and speculative, had suggested that up to 47,000 troops were descending on Hankou.[123] In addition, there was the local Chinese population, many of whom were involved in protests and riots against continued foreign possession of the concessions. Even allowing for the possibility that the lower figure might also have been inflated, and the potential for military assistance from other foreign powers in the port, the Hankou defence force was heavily outnumbered. Indeed, every available man was landed on 3 January just to deal with civilian protests.[124]

A subsequent assessment by Admiral Tyrwhitt suggested that an additional 1,000 men, presumably referring to the 12th Royal Marine Battalion, would have evened the odds in the

[119] Admiral Tyrwhitt to Admiralty, 22 January 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[120] Appendix to a report on the situation in China for Committee of Imperial Defence, 30 June 1925, TNA, CAB 24/174/26.
[121] Rear-Admiral Cameron to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 29 November 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[122] January 1927 report on ship movements, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[123] Rear-Admiral Cameron to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 14 January 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[124] Ship's log of HMS *Bee,* 1927, TNA, ADM 53/71186.

short-term. With the Chinese army possessing a range of artillery, however, Tyrwhitt doubted whether any defence of the concession could be sustained for any period of time.[125] The shifting balance of military technology in China had evened the odds markedly from earlier decades, placing the Royal Navy in a situation where for once it was outgunned. There were also unconfirmed reports that Guomindang aircraft had been seen bombing targets around the city, adding a further potential complication to the defence.[126] Quite simply, holding the Hankou concession in January 1927 with the resources at Cameron's disposal would have been virtually impossible.

Cameron also had to keep in mind the wider situation of the middle and upper Yangtze region while deciding how to behave at Hankou. There were still hundreds of British civilians at Yangtze treaty ports up-river of Hankou, who needed to be evacuated.[127] Sichuan was calmer than it had been immediately after the Wanxian Incident, but Britain was still highly unpopular. All pretence of maintaining Britain's image on the upper Yangtze had gone in the aftermath of that calamitous episode. The Navy's gunboats were forced to send small boats and the ships' boys into even remote river ports to obtain supplies, due to widespread unwillingness to do business with British officials.[128] In particular, it was nearly impossible to obtain locally sourced coal to help fuel the gunboats, which were undertaking heavy duties and so consuming greater quantities than usual. Indeed, the Navy's usual local coal merchant in Wanxian was arrested in late 1926 for supplying the armed steamer *Kiawo.*[129] This problem also applied at Hankou, but was less acute as some foreign merchant vessels were still venturing that far up river.

A violent clash at Hankou would therefore not only have been futile, but it could have endangered both the upper Yangtze gunboat force and the civilians they were attempting to evacuate. Only a reckless and bloodthirsty commander would have chosen to defend aggressively the Hankou concession in those circumstances. The decision to back down at the city does not therefore mark the end of gunboat diplomacy, which had actually occurred months earlier. Instead it reinforced Wanxian's lesson. Royal Navy gunboats were unable to

[125] Admiral Tyrwhitt to Admiralty, 7 January 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8712/154.
[126] RAF intelligence report on Chinese air forces, 1927, TNA, AIR 5/865.
[127] Pratt to Lampson, 14 March 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[128] Intelligence reports from HMS *Widgeon,* 15 October and 31 December 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[129] Rear-Admiral Cameron to Admiralty, 29 January 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8712/154.

match the challenge posed by large numbers of well-armed Chinese troops if those soldiers were no longer sufficiently in awe of British prestige and thus afraid of potential retribution.

The gunboat retreat

1927 would pan out as a year in which violent clashes between the Royal Navy and different Chinese groups occurred with a regularity and volume unlike any other part of the decade. The Northern Expedition moving along the Yangtze River and contemporary anti-foreign protests triggered a crisis situation for the British establishment, in its attempts to maintain many aspects of its informal imperial influence. The actions of the Royal Navy during this period have generally been assessed as a whole, analysing their cumulative impact. This was a year unlike most others for the China Station, however, and so to understand fully the Navy's actions, it is vital to consider the unusual nature of the force posted to the region at that time. The China Station in the last months of 1926 was reinforced by the arrival of a destroyer flotilla and the return of HMS *Hermes* and its aircraft. That increased the number of surface fighting vessels from twenty-five to thirty-five, and with it the total manpower on the station by roughly half. By April 1927, the number of surface warships in the region had reached fifty-six, bringing with them an additional 8,000 naval personnel.[130]

The wave of vessels was in itself a reflection that the Royal Navy was attempting a different approach to dealing with the immediate challenges posed by the situation in China. The scale of that task force, as assessed in the first chapter, has been poorly understood in existing histories. Something not considered so far, which was caused by that sudden influx, is that the many additional warships brought with them a wave of new officers, many of whom had never served on the China Station prior to that point. As a result, few really understood the environment they found themselves in. In the case of HMS *Emerald*, for example, the first detailed official briefing the officers and crew received on the situation in China came almost three months after the warship had joined the command.[131] That presentation was made by Captain Hugh England, commanding *Emerald,* who had little additional knowledge than his crew. After a quick meeting with the Commander-in-Chief, shortly after arriving in China, England had few chances to discuss events with other fellow

[130] Hansard, 13 April 1927, vol.205, cc.342-3.
[131] Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book.

commanders, as only HMS *Caradoc* stopped at Nanjing during the intervening weeks.[132] His primary source of information was therefore from civilians living in Nanjing, particularly the British members of the Nanjing Club.[133] It seems very unlikely that England had a rounded understanding of either Britain's overall position in China or the evolving strategy for the Royal Navy to deal with the challenges it faced.

There was also considerable variety among the new crews in their loyalty to their new senior commanding officers. While Vice-Admiral Tyrwhitt was generally highly respected, given his reputation as a hero of the First World War, his deputy Rear Admiral Cameron commanding the crucial Yangtze River region, was not seen in the same light. Cameron had captained the cruiser HMS *Phaeton* at the Battle of Jutland, among other warships, but the appointment to the Yangtze in 1925 was his first operational experience of senior command. As a result, Commander Louis Hamilton noted proudly in his journal that he and other officers deliberately undermined Cameron's authority and considered him to be an 'old woman' who was too willing to 'turn the other cheek to these Bolshevik swine'.[134] Given Cameron's relatively strong instructions and behaviour prior to and during the Wanxian Incident, Hamilton's statement may be more a reflection of his own attitudes and inexperience of the situation than a fair assessment of his new commanding officer. It is also possible that Wanxian's political and diplomatic repercussions took their toll on Cameron, leading to a comparatively cautious outlook. Regardless of the accuracy of Hamilton's statement, such views existed and influenced the behaviour of the officers newly assigned to Cameron's force. At the height of the crisis in the first half of 1927, it would prove to be those fresh officers like Hamilton, particularly those under Cameron's command, who became heavily involved in some of the most violent and controversial incidents.

During the first two months of 1927, Cameron was tasked with leading the evacuation of the cities along the Upper Yangtze, further calming the situation at Hankou, and protecting Britain's interests on the middle and lower stretches of the river. The first of those tasks, conducted for the most part by his existing cadre of junior officers aboard their gunboats, proved successful and largely peaceful. 380 British and 200 non-British foreign civilians were

[132] Movements of HM Ships on the Yangtze, March and April 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[133] Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book.
[134] Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-1928.

safely escorted out of Chongqing, Wanxian, and the surrounding areas in the first two months of the year, leaving only 48 remaining, many of whom were missionaries.[135] The gunboat commanders involved appear to have focused on their task, with little regard for previous concerns about maintaining Britain's image or punishing Chinese transgressions. After Navy stores were stolen by picketers while being loaded aboard HMS *Mantis* at Chongqing, for example, an unarmed party of British marines was sent to try and retrieve the items, but they were beaten and forced to retire to the gunboat. An official protest was made and an apology was received from General Liu Hsiang, in command of Sichuan, but *Mantis* left the port without the stores and no-one was punished for their loss.[136] Likewise, the crew of *Cockchafer* at Yichang were free to play sport ashore within a month of arriving, much in the style of earlier years, but only after calmly riding-out the initial hostility to their arrival.[137] It is worth noting that the temperamental Acheson had already departed in late 1926 to recuperate from wounds sustained at Wanxian, and then commanded a destroyer in home waters.[138] There was no risk that he might spark another clash in China.

There certainly remained some superficial similarities between the Royal Navy's tactics for evacuating the upper Yangtze ports and how they had conducted their gunboat duties in previous years. This included issuing threats to bombard towns. During one incident at Chengling in January 1927, for example, Lieutenant Commander Douglas Garvey aboard HMS *Woodcock* did threaten to bombard the town. The message was conveyed in response to Commissioner Tung threatening to fire upon British vessels in the port and Chinese troops subsequently moved a field gun onto a hill overlooking the river. Garvey argued that as Tung represented the Guomindang his threat bordered on a declaration of war against Britain, and if *Woodcock* were fired upon a state of war would exist.[139] Formalising the conversation led to a quick clarification by Tung that his threat was only aimed at British merchant vessels who he had not authorised to leave port. Ultimately, Tung reluctantly agreed that the port's foreign community could be evacuated aboard those steamers under the supervision of *Woodcock.* When looking in detail at the incident, however, there are

[135] Letter from Pratt to Lampson, 14 March 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[136] Letter from Pratt to Lampson, 23 March 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[137] Rear-Admiral Cameron to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 31 March 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[138] Personal file of Leon Stopford Acheson, TNA, ADM 196/144/741.
[139] Consul Jones to Lampson, 20 January 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.

some clear differences in Garvey's tactics compared to those previously employed by the Royal Navy.

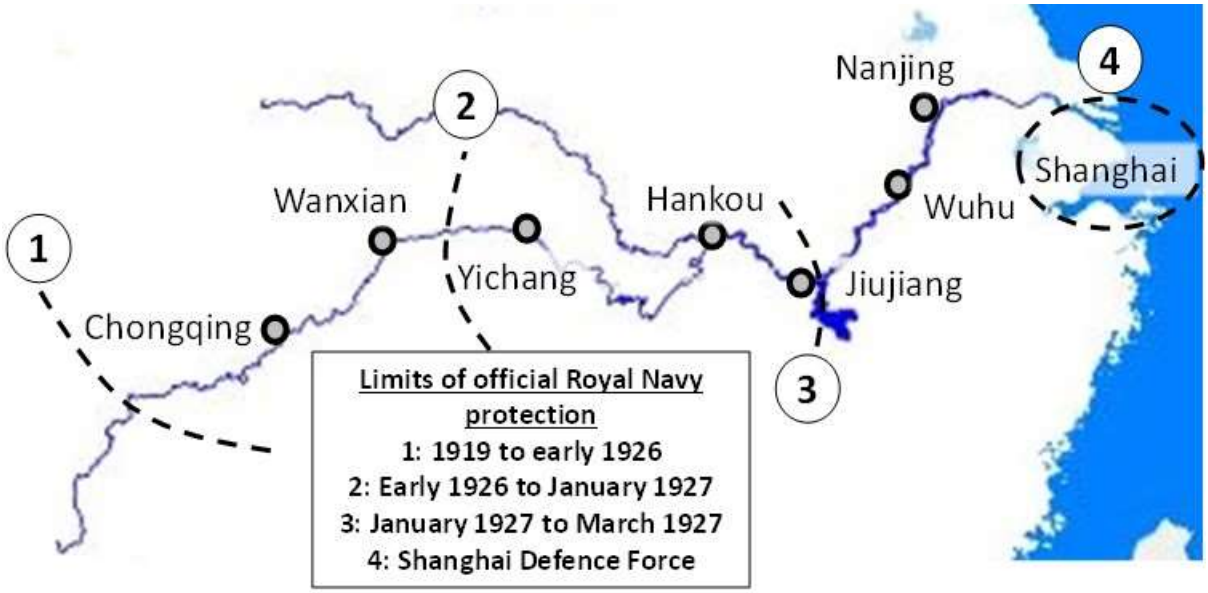
Commander Garvey appears to have been deadly serious in his threat to bombard Chengling, having kept his men at actions stations by their guns throughout the drama.[140] During the full course of events, however, the gunboat remained mid-river and no parties of armed sailors were sent ashore or to the British merchant vessels. Moreover, even when picketers sank a junk in front of the British vessels and attempted to sink further boats, to prevent the steamers from departing, Garvey simply ordered a Jardines' tug moved to ensure there was a clear path. While he felt that Tung was bluffing, Garvey did not risk testing that theory. The local Consul, Grant Jones, subsequently argued to Britain's Minister to China, Miles Lampson, that a bloodbath would have been better than a surrender that had harmed Britain's image in the region. Garvey simply reported in return that his primary duty was to ensure the safety of the civilians under his care.[141] Such statements are notable in their absence from earlier accounts. Prioritising the evacuation in that way was different to what was expected, both tactically and emotionally, under a policy of gunboat diplomacy. While the strong defence of British possessions afloat on China's waterways did show a technical use of extra-territorial rights, in practice the Royal Navy had always considered the decks of British flagged vessels as British soil, wherever in the world they might be.[142]

Hankou may have been the core location that defined Britain's position on the upper Yangtze in early 1927, but it did not become the boundary between retreat and defence after the decision to withdraw from the concession in January. Gunboats were still supervising the official evacuation of the ports upriver, including Chongqing, Wanxian, Changsha, Yichang, and Chengling. Nonetheless, on 9 January 1927, just a few days after the Hankou concessions had been effectively abandoned, the decision was made to also completely evacuate Jiujiang, a day's sailing downriver of Hankou.[143] The 5,000 Chinese troops that had taken up position in and around Jiujiang presented a threat that the Royal Navy's Yangtze flotilla was equally as incapable of countering as that posed by the 12,000 at

[140] Commander Garvey to Rear-Admiral Cameron, 17 January 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[141] Consul Jones to Lampson, 20 January 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[142] Taylor, 'The Bund: Littoral Space of Empire', pp.132-133.
[143] Intelligence report by Captain Heathcote, 10 January 1927, KCLMA, within P.W. Burnett files, Catalogue ID 2243.

Hankou.[144] Against such numbers the joint parade by the entire international naval force at Jiujiang two months earlier, of just 125 sailors from Britain, America, France, and Japan appeared an ineffective and token gesture – a transparent pretence of strength and unity.[145] Anti-British rioting within the town on 7 January, in response to reports from Hankou, had led to valuables and foreign civilians being clustered at protected properties near the waterfront. [146] The final decision to evacuate, however, was made in light of the presence of so many well-armed troops in and around the city. As a result of those evacuations, the confluence of the Gan and Yangtze rivers became the temporary boundary (Point 3 in Figure 16). Britain had lost official direct access to the markets of Sichuan, Hunan, and Hubei provinces, along with the western part of Jiangxi after the evacuation of Jiujiang.

Figure 16: Map showing the extent of official Royal Navy protection on the Yangtze[147]



Correspondence between Cameron, Tyrwhitt, and the Admiralty in January and February outlines how the Royal Navy planned to continue defending the concessions downriver of the Gan River boundary. Tyrwhitt went into considerable detail about the forces available for defending Britain's interests along the lower Yangtze and how far he could rely upon American and Japanese troops to provide support if violence ensued.[148] His official assessment sent to the Admiralty in late January also suggested that Britain should seek

[144] Admiral Tyrwhitt to Admiralty, 22 January 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[145] Acting-Consul Ogden to Sir Ronald Macleay, 4 November 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[146] Diary of Arthur Ransome, January – February 1927, Brotherton Library, BC MS 20c Ransome/1/A/9/3/3.
[147] Produced by the author.
[148] Assorted correspondence between Tyrwhitt and the Admiralty, early 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2509.

quietly to undermine the Chinese authorities at Hankou, rather than seize the concession back through violence. If the Guomindang were seen to have failed at Hankou, then Britain could make the case that its supervision of the Treaty Ports was vital for the success of China's economic hubs. Britain might then have its extra-territorial rights in Hankou restored and regain complete access to the upper Yangtze basin. The memorandum did note, however, that if Hankou under Chinese control proved a success, then Tyrwhitt believed Britain would certainly lose all its possessions in China, including Hong Kong.[149] While it was a pivotal moment, the withdrawal of military guarantees over British concessions at Hankou and neighbouring ports was not seen as a permanent move by the Royal Navy when the decision was made.

The end result of the events on the upper Yangtze between the Wanxian Incident and February 1927 was that Britain accepted the loss of some peripheral brown-water Treaty Port concessions, in an effort to defend those of greater value. Contrary to previous interpretations, that process was not one of calculated surrender, nor was it one forced by 'vigorous popular reactions that could no longer be suppressed'. [150] The mass protests were a significant factor in triggering the initial defensive preparations and some nominally temporary evacuations. However, at both Hankou and Jiujiang in particular, but at many other ports along the Upper Yangtze including Wanxian, Britain had simply been militarily outmatched. The China Station's commanders were both unwilling and unable simultaneously to counter large armies at multiple locations, which were unified at least to some extent under Guomindang direction. Had a clash occurred between the Royal Navy and the Chinese armies, the British force would have been outnumbered and almost certainly alone, with only one Japanese and one Italian gunboat left above Hankou able to offer potential assistance.[151] These factors were made all the worse by the influx of modern weaponry.

By the end of the decade, when faced with a communist army 10,000 strong at Changsha in July 1930, the Navy acknowledged that any possible attempt at gunboat bluster would have failed. Even before taking changed diplomatic priorities into account, they were heavily

[149] Memorandum on the Situation in Hankou, January 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[150] Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire,* pp.179-183; Osterhammel, 'China', p.653.
[151] Intelligence Bulletin, 10 January 1927, KCLMA, Catalogue ID 2243.

outnumbered and many of the Chinese troops were armed with the 'latest' machine guns and field artillery. [152] Nonetheless, the evacuations in 1926 and early 1927 did not involve complete abandonment. British gunboats, merchantmen, and civilians were all still present at locations along stretches of the upper and middle Yangtze, just in lower numbers.

The lower Yangtze and other treaty ports around China remained tense during this period, but relatively calm, with protests and boycotts inspired by Wanxian and the unequal treaties in general. Those protests combined with press reports of atrocities in other ports, and concern at what many British expatriates felt was a significant loss of British prestige at Hankou, together created an air of fear among the British expatriate communities, particularly at Shanghai.[153] In public, the Municipal Council issued a proclamation in January aimed at the Chinese population, stating that the SMC was happy to work with whoever controlled the Shanghai region and talk of a possible war was premature.[154] In private, all talk was about the very real prospect of war coming to Shanghai. Tyrwhitt reported to the Admiralty on 12 January that in addition to the reinforcements he had already received, he needed at least an Army division to secure Shanghai. A worst-case scenario involving the evacuation of Shanghai had been discussed, but Tyrwhitt felt that not only would such an event be catastrophic for Britain's reputation, it would be virtually impossible to conduct safely. As a result, the formation of a Shanghai Defence Force was approved by Cabinet the following week, along with the immediate despatch of the First Cruiser Squadron from Malta and the hastily formed 12th Royal Marine Battalion from Britain.[155] The influx of new service personnel that started in late 1926 became a flood.

Sailing to War

Plans to defend robustly those treaty ports still considered as core to the Empire were not unique to officers on the China Station, with the new policy extending all the way to Whitehall. The First Cruiser Squadron, for example, was authorised by the Admiralty to send its midshipmen and section leaders ashore at Malta so they could train with the Army prior to departure. During the journey the warship commanders were further instructed to

[152] Private papers of J.W. Edwards, IWM, Documents 11614, Box 01/39/1.
[153] Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire,* p.179.
[154] 'In View of Recent Occurrences in other Ports' in the Shanghai Municipal Gazette, 14 January 1927, SMA, U1-1-922.
[155] Admiral Tyrwhitt to Admiralty, 22 January 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2509.

conduct practice firing and prepare for landing shore parties.[156] Similarly, having newly arrived at Nanjing from the East Indies Station HMS *Emerald* practised landing its full crew, less those required to maintain the ship itself, in preparation for a future defence of the concession.[157] A bombardment range was also set up at Mirs Bay, so the new vessels could gain experience in firing at land-based targets.[158] All this preparatory activity may simply have been for the defence of Shanghai, except that most of the new warships were subsequently spread around the treaty ports, highlighting that they were intended for a wider range of locations. Having steamed at high speed around the world, while training to fight, the new forces were prepared for action. With the Northern Expedition nearing the middle and lower Yangtze, and the existing China Station forces spread thin, the stage was set for the crisis to erupt into war.

The China Station may have moved on from an approach of gunboat diplomacy, to focus on trying to maintain the status quo, but the newly arriving crews from other stations did not know or understand that a shift had occurred. Moreover, some of the new crews arrived in a state of excitement and enthusiasm at the prospect of action. Perhaps a portent of things to come, HMS *Emerald* was just such a ship. Captain England continued to order frequent landing drills throughout February and early March, in between social events ashore in the Nanjing concession. This included testing alternative approaches for preparing landings to improve the speed with which *Emerald* could respond in emergencies. The 'platoons' of sailors and marines intended for shore parties were split into two, for example, with alternate half-units always dressed in full kit ready for action. *Emerald* was also regularly sending armed teams to intervene in disagreements involving British steamers at Nanjing, although in most cases the situation had been settled before they arrived.[159] By mid-March, a platoon of twelve sailors or marines armed with Lewis machine guns were a regular feature on *Emerald's* main deck, sheltering behind improvised redoubts made of sandbags and sheets of armour plating.[160] While individually none of those actions was particularly unusual, cumulatively they indicate the elevated enthusiasm of one newly arrived crew. It

[156] Admiral Tillard to Admiralty, January 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[157] Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book, 20 January 1927.
[158] de Winton, *Ships in Bottles,* p.28.
[159] Ship's log of HMS *Emerald,* February 1927 to February 1928, TNA, ADM 53/76701; Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book, 1927.
[160] Photograph of HMS *Emerald,* 13 March 1927, KCLMA, Catalogue ID 2243.

also highlights that Captain England did not approach his role with the same focus on calm stabilisation that had become apparent among Rear Admiral Cameron's existing cadre of officers in the aftermath of the Wanxian Incident.

As armies of the Northern Expedition neared Nanjing in late March, it was the enthusiastic England with *Emerald* that was on the front line, at a point on the Yangtze where Britain still intended to set a boundary behind which it would maintain its extra-territorial possessions. In the events that unfolded, *Emerald* bombarded part of the city with its main guns, during an effort to exfiltrate British and American shore parties and civilians. Even after the initial crisis had subsided, Captain England pressed the following day for permission to punitively bombard the city.[161] Indeed, he argued so strongly that Admiral Tyrwhitt removed England from his command and placed him in an administrative role the following month as punishment, and Tyrwhitt himself was not shy of using violence.[162] Indeed, only a few weeks later Tyrwhitt was reportedly visibly disappointed when his flagship HMS *Hawkins* was not fired upon near Shanghai, as he was eager to see some action.[163] The overly aggressive stance taken by *Emerald* throughout the situation can therefore be partly attributed to the warship being a new arrival and an excessively enthusiastic desire to repeat the famous successes of the Boxer Rebellion. That previous crisis had, after all, provided the former Admiral of the Fleet Earl Jellicoe and Admiral Roger Keyes the fame that helped launch their careers.[164]

It is worth noting that had it been a resident China Station cruiser posted to Nanjing the end result may have appeared broadly similar to outside observers. With a request from allied forces ashore for an immediate supporting bombardment, it seems unlikely that any Royal Navy officer would have declined to assist their American friends. Indeed, two weeks later HMS *Carlisle* risked fresh clashes when ordered to prevent Guomindang forces from removing British-owned railway rolling stock from Nanjing by taking it across the river to

[161] Patterson, *Tyrwhitt of the Harwich Force*, p.253.
[162] Ship's log of HMS *Emerald,* 27 April 1927, TNA, ADM 53/76701; Captain England to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 10 May 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2527.
[163] Patterson, *Tyrwhitt of the Harwich Force*, p.262.
[164] Later Admiral of the Fleet Baron Keyes. Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel,* (London: Pimlico, 2005), p.60; Man and Lun, *Eastern Fortress*, p.51; Wright, *China's Steam Navy*, p.117.

Pukow.[165] Where a different course of action probably would have occurred was on the second day of the incident, which saw Captain England threaten and vehemently demand permission to conduct a punitive bombardment of Nanjing. While that was broadly in-keeping with what would be expected from a warship conducting gunboat diplomacy, threatening or using a short violence outburst to force a change in behaviour, it was wholly at odds with Rear Admiral Cameron's orders and policy for the Yangtze region. Admiral Tyrwhitt also explained at the time that his decision not to approve Captain England's request was ultimately because he felt it would have served no practical purpose. Again, this is not to say Tyrwhitt was against the use of violence, indeed his biographer noted that during this period he was strongly in favour of war with China, wanting to defeat the Guomindang rather than coerce them.[166] What it does show, is that neither of the two senior commanders on the China Station appears to have held the intangible longer-term focus of gunboat diplomacy in particularly high regards. While contemporary observers and later historians have debated the first bombardment and its deadly collateral damage, those in the Navy at the time took note of Captain England's re-assignment a month after the incident.[167]

In isolation, what happened at Nanjing only provides a modest case showing the difference between the mentalities of the newly arrived officers and those already on the station, and how that influenced the tactics they looked to adopt. When combined with other such cases, however, a clear pattern develops. Rear Admiral William Boyle and his First Cruiser Squadron, which arrived at Hong Kong shortly after *Emerald,* certainly had a reputation for wanting to take an aggressive line with China.[168] Tyrwhitt's reluctance to share centre-stage at Shanghai with another British flag officer, however, kept Boyle around Hong Kong and firmly on London's leash.[169] In contrast, the newly arriving destroyers were quickly spread

[165] Hansard, 23 May 1927, v.206, cc.1639-41; Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book; China Station: list of incidents and important questions 1925-1932, TNA, ADM 1/8756/137. Burnett's account suggests that *Emerald* was originally chosen for this task, but it was then re-assigned to *Carlisle.* Given the previous events that may well have been a wise decision.
[166] Patterson, *Tyrwhitt of the Harwich Force*, pp.253-256.
[167] Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book; Captain England to Admiral Tyrwhitt, 10 May 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2527. Captain England was placed in charge of organising civilian transport for the evacuation of civilians from ports in northern China, effectively a demotion from commanding one of the Navy's newest cruisers. He did not return to commanding a frontline warship until late in 1931.
[168] de Winton, *Ships in Bottles*, p.28.
[169] Patterson, *Tyrwhitt of the Harwich Force*, p.245;

around the station. Commander Hamilton recorded in his diary that when dining aboard HMS *Frobisher*, after arriving at Hong Kong, he was just as keen to fight as Boyle, who he described as having a 'great blood lust on'. While Boyle was not his direct superior it seems that the discussion defined Hamilton's approach to China, with Commodore John Pearson at Hong Kong unable to provide specific orders about what the destroyers were actually meant to do.[170] While apparently somewhat calmer, Commander de Winton later recalled in a similar manner how he took his ship up the Yangtze without really knowing what the situation was.[171] Enthusiastic, relatively junior officers were therefore being fed into the Yangtze with most of their guidance coming from the war-mongering Boyle, who had no recent experience in China.

When sailing up the Yangtze, the new officers did not appear to act in a way that was far removed from the approach taken by existing China Station commanders, but nonetheless there was still a difference. As might be expected in the situation, the new warships would immediately go to action stations upon sighting Chinese troops, their main guns ready to fire.[172] A standing order, radioed around the station after the Nanjing Incident, stated that warships could open fire at shore targets if fired upon first.[173] The new arrivals appear to have interpreted that as 'should open fire'. HMS *Emerald's* semi-official published account of its voyage summarised the results of that confusion as events 'developed into rather a farce, as even if a little sniping took place at ships the full main armament was brought to bear'.[174] HMS *Wanderer* under Commander Hamilton, for example, engaged Chinese troops with all the guns at his disposal after coming under relatively light, if accurate, fire near Jiangsu on 2 May 1927. Even Hamilton realised afterwards that the expenditure of ammunition, particularly the use of seventy-six shells from *Wanderer's* main 4.7" gun, was excessive and they had been too enthusiastic. What really marks the incident out, however, was that Hamilton turned *Wanderer* around and made further passes of that stretch of river to repeatedly bombard and attempt to destroy the Chinese troops' field gun.[175] Similarly, HMS *Veteran* expended roughly eighty shells to flatten a field gun at Kueishing Fort near

[170] Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-1928.
[171] de Winton, *Ships in Bottles,* pp.28-30.
[172] Ibid.*,* pp.29.
[173] Midshipman's log of P.W. Burnett.
[174] 'Short Account of the Voyages and Deeds of HMS *Emerald* October 1925 to June 1928', IWM, p.75.
[175] Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-1928.

Zhenjiang in early April on its first run up the Yangtze.[176] *Veteran's* Lieutenant Commander Henry Clanchy also ordered his ship to turn around and return past the fort to continue the bombardment, even though it having suffered no more than a few bullet scratches to its paintwork during the whole affair.[177] Both commanders had quickly expended one-sixth of their warship's total store of shells, and a much higher proportion of their high explosive ones, during a single engagement against targets of negligible military value.[178]

In contrast, the China Station resident HMS *Magnolia* had been fired upon on the same stretch of river in mid-April. *Magnolia's* Commander Harold Hadley, however, chose to make a brief reply with one Pom-Pom and its Lewis guns, and ordered a cease fire within ten minutes, once the ship moved beyond the range of the Chinese troops.[179] Similarly, the gunboat HMS *Mantis* came under fire near Nanjing in April, but only replied with its machine guns.[180] Further afield around the Pearl River Delta, dealing with groups of bandits, gunboat commanders repeatedly reported landing and talking to villagers in response to incidents of firing at passing British ships. Lieutenant Commander Thompson on HMS *Robin,* for example, stated that he saw little value in firing as it would punish innocent civilians and the real offenders would almost certainly escape unharmed.[181] While the Navy's existing commanders were taking a pragmatic, defensive approach to dealing with gunfire from Chinese troops or bandits, the new arrivals were looking to make a statement and utilised traditional, aggressive Victorian gunboat tactics.

In light of the enthusiasm with which the newly arrived warships had been engaging shore targets, Vice-Admiral Tyrwhitt even felt it necessary to relay a series of instructions across his command restricting his commanding officers' actions. On 18 May, orders were radioed out across the station that the expenditure of ammunition should be kept to a minimum, not only to limit the political impact, but also for reasons of economy. Moreover, Tyrwhitt

[176] Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book; Diary for the General Staff of Shaforce, 9 April 1927, TNA, WO 191/2.
[177] K.R. Buckley, 'The Third Destroyer Flotilla in China 1926-1928', *The Naval Review* 18/1 (1930), p.107.
[178] Appendix to Combined Operations Manual detailing ammunition stored on HM Ships, 1925, TNA, AIR 10/5533.
[179] Ship's log of HMS *Magnolia* 1926-1927, TNA, ADM 53/80211.
[180] Midshipman P.W. Burnett's log book, April 1927.
[181] Lieutenant-Commander Thompson to Commodore Pearson, 1 March 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510; West River gunboat correspondence, 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.

expressly forbade the use of the warships' main guns unless there was a clear target, presenting a threat to life, and where firing would prove effective.[182]

While such orders did instil some restraint on the new arrivals, they were surprisingly resistant to softening their stance as they got to understand the situation in China better. When posted to the recently evacuated Jiujiang in mid-May, for example, Commander Hamilton was told by the local Acting-Consul Ogden that surrendering the concession had changed little in practice. While many civilians had been evacuated, and the police and other civil authorities were now under Chinese control, business largely continued as before. Ogden had even been able to get his Chinese counterpart Chen to agree to pay rent to the British consulate for using the municipal buildings. Despite that apparently favourable *modus vivendi*, Hamilton wrote in his journal that 'I shall not have the slightest hesitation in opening fire if they give me the opportunity'.

In any event, Hamilton did not sit and wait for the opportunity, and within days of arriving at Jiujiang he sent two dozen sailors marching through the old concession in an attempt to annoy Chen and provoke a response. When visited shortly afterwards by the Commander-in-Chief, Hamilton felt that Tyrwhitt had been amused by the exercise, although he was subsequently taken aside by his superior and instructed to avoid creating an incident. The two officers knew and liked each-other, from when Hamilton had served under Tyrwhitt during his time commanding the Harwich Force in and immediately after the First World War. Indeed, Tyrwhitt recorded that he had 'a very high opinion of this officer', after that commission and almost certainly played an important role in Hamilton's early career development.[183] As a result, Hamilton does appear to have respected the instructions to behave himself, although only temporarily.[184]

This appears to have been one of a few reported cases where Tyrwhitt initially gave the impression he supported such rash actions, only subsequently to request that his subordinates follow his official policy of restraint. Indeed, Tyrwhitt appears to have been conflicted between a personal desire for action and his professional sense of duty as Commander-in-Chief to act in Britain's best interests. On returning to Shanghai for example,

[182] Orders from Admiral Tyrwhitt aboard HMS *Hawkins,* 18 May 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2527.
[183] Personnel file of Commander Louis Keppel-Hamilton, 1 February 1919, TNA, ADM 196/145/22.
[184] Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-1928.

after meeting Hamilton and telling him to avoid creating incidents, Tyrwhitt was openly disappointed that his flagship had not been given an opportunity to fire.[185] This behaviour may have contributed to the aggressiveness of some newly arrived officers, who did not have time to get to understand Tyrwhitt's habits and that not all he said should have been taken as actual guidance on how to behave.

Those developments are in contrast to earlier events, with the actions of a single gunboat commander illustrating the issue rather well. Commander Edward Jukes-Hughes was one of the first naval officers re-assigned to the China Station towards the end of the First World War, as the gunboats started to be re-commissioned. Within weeks of having taken command of HMS *Widgeon* on the upper Yangtze, the gunboat came under heavy rifle fire on 7 December 1917 after leaving the Yellow Flower Gorge near Chongqing. A later count revealed that at least a dozen bullets had hit the vessel, with one entering the officers' wardroom. Jukes-Hughes ordered his men to reply with the 6-pounder main gun, and again the following day with both the main gun and maxim machine-guns, in order to silence their assailants. He recorded in his journal that at least some of the attackers had been killed. In contrast, when Widgeon came under fire on 2 July 1920 near Zhangzhou, Jukes-Hughes recorded that he first ordered the firing of a blank shell, followed by a live shell aimed into the middle of an empty field. Subsequent communication then revealed a case of mistaken identity, with apologies offered, and the incident passed without injury.

There was clearly some excessive enthusiasm during the former incident, but after Jukes-Hughes gained a better understanding of China he adopted the nuanced approach required with gunboat diplomacy. Admittedly the second event came almost three years later, but after those initial violent events, Jukes-Hughes' journal suggests he gained a taste for acting as a diplomat when dealing with potential flashpoints during the intervening period. This is supported by his personnel files, which are full of praise for his calm and tactful behaviour, both when commanding *Widgeon* and then after his promotion to Senior Naval Officer on the Upper-Yangtze. Indeed, Rear-Admiral George Borrett recorded that Jukes-Hughes'

[185] Patterson, *Tyrwhitt of the Harwich Force*, p.262.

actions ‘materially increased the prestige of the British flag through the province of Szechuan', benefitting from having built up an ‘extensive knowledge of China’.[186]

The wave of new Royal Navy commanders arriving in 1927 showed no such interest in diplomacy or getting to know the country. They arrived with and continued to maintain a desire for action, and a strong willingness to take offence for perceived slights on behalf of the Navy and British Empire as a whole. That mindset went against one of the core tenets of gunboat diplomacy – the limited application of force. Curiously, while the newly arriving naval officers during this period tended to push an aggressive line, those of the 12th Royal Marine Battalion did not. Having arrived on 28 February, the marines initially took charge of defending Shanghai’s International Settlement, before slowly being replaced as British Army units trickled into the city. Throughout the Battalion’s China war diary, the commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Robert Carpenter repeatedly noted that given the exposed position of his men, they should focus on defusing situations and avoiding confrontation.[187] This appears to have been largely a result of the precarious situations the Royal Marines were often placed in.

Shortly after arriving in Shanghai, Colonel Carpenter proposed that those of his men intended to defend British possessions in Pudong, which was in the Chinese part of the city, should be based in ships on the Bund on the International side of the Huangpu River. That decision was based solely on the recognition that putting a small force of marines into Chinese territory, in the midst of large numbers of Chinese troops, would present a significant risk of clashes and damage to British property.[188] In an even more pronounced case, in September, one company of marines was posted to defend British factories on the outskirts of Nanjing. It was hoped that those marines would provide sufficient protection for British businesses to be able to retrieve valuable machinery. The expeditionary force quickly converted a factory into an improvised fort, and confidently reported that they could defend it against any mob. Nonetheless, there was an underlying warning both in the orders issued to that company and the reports from it, that 10,000 Chinese troops were still positioned around Nanjing. With it came a reminder that the marines could only call upon

[186] Personnel file for Lieutenant Commander Edward Jukes-Hughes, TNA, ADM 196/126/88.
[187] War Diaries of 12th RMB on service in China, 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8709/102.
[188] War Diaries of 12th RMB on service in China, 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8709/102.

reinforcements from a single cruiser and were therefore badly outnumbered if the worst were to happen. As a result, the force was instructed to maintain a cordial relationship with the local Chinese commander and to avoid provoking protests.[189]

The discipline shown by the 12th RMB in strictly following Carpenter's orders is all the more unusual as it had been formed as an ad hoc unit. Newly formed from a combination of companies out of the Royal Marine depots at Chatham, Portsmouth, and Plymouth, the battalion had arrived at Hong Kong only six weeks after the order had been issued for its formation. Carpenter had been given little time to prepare his unit for the tasks they would face. That challenge might have been avoided had the proposals of a 1924 Admiralty committee on the 'Functions and Training of the Royal Marines' been enacted.

The 'Madden Report' as it was known, after its Chairman Admiral of the Fleet Sir Charles Madden, tendered a definition of the Marines' future role and made a series of recommendations as to how the force should be modernised. Adjutant-General Alexander Hutchison stated that their primary function was as a 'Landing force to preserve order, or to deal promptly with trouble in out of way places'.[190] In effect, Hutchison was arguing that the Marines were there to support the Navy's peacetime role as Britain's imperial gendarmerie. While acknowledging the financial challenges facing the Admiralty, the report proposed withdrawing the small marine contingents aboard cruisers and light warships, and the formation of four 1,600-man formations and a central reserve. Three of those units would be placed at Bermuda, Gibraltar, and Hong Kong, from where they could quickly deploy to most of the likely trouble-spots around the Empire. While this required 1,900 extra Marines, it was expected that savings would be made by using civilians to take on some existing depot tasks, and the British Army garrisons at those three hubs could be reduced.[191] The proposal had been rejected by First Sea Lord Earl Beatty, however, due to significant initial costs.

Had the plan been enacted, the China Station would have had a force at its disposal ready for rapid deployment in response to potential threats. Kenneth Clifford has previously suggested that the essence of the proposals was still put into place, given the quick

[189] Orders and reports from Nanjing, September 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8709/102.
[190] Memorandum by Adjutant-General Alexander Hutchison, 1924, TNA, ADM 1/8664/134.
[191] Report on the Functions and Training of the Royal Marines, 1924, TNA, ADM 1/8664/134.

formation and deployment of the battalion to Shanghai in 1927.[192] Given Admiral Tyrwhitt's statements about defending Hankou in January if he had 1,600 marines at his disposal, however, the six weeks it took for the force to arrive from Britain was very significant.[193] Without speculating on what the end result might have been, a marine battalion at Hong Kong would have been close enough to reach Hankou within a few days, with the orders issued by the Commander-in-Chief, not through Whitehall. It does highlight the limitation of Clifford's argument, as the deployment was hardly that of the rapid reaction force envisaged in the Madden Report. Perhaps in defence of Beatty's decision, having five detachments of eighty to one hundred marines aboard each of the China Station's cruisers and smaller numbers on the sloops, may have been better suited to day-to-day requirements. With the exception of the 1926-27 crisis, having those smaller contingents spread around the region allowed the Navy to reassure treaty port communities at short notice during times of trouble.

The Royal Marines by nature have always been separate from their parent service. When looking just at the Royal Navy itself, there was a clear divide in mentality and tactical approach between those officers who served on and those who were attached to the China Station, throughout the core crisis period between late 1926 and mid-1927. Within the localised context, it was the arriving group of naval officers who were behaving in the unusual manner, but taking the Royal Navy as a whole it was the China Station acting differently. The warships arriving in China came from all around the Empire; *Emerald* and *Enterprise* from the East Indies Station, the First Cruiser Squadron and Third Destroyer Flotilla from the Mediterranean Fleet, the Eighth Destroyer Flotilla from the Atlantic Fleet, and *Argus* from the Home Fleet. Sailing to the sound of the guns, those warships all came with a basic belief that aggressive gunboat tactics were effective in dealing with China and the officers were generally excited at the prospect of action. In August 1927 for example, Rear Admiral Hugh Tweedie was disappointed at being chosen to replace Cameron as commander of the Yangtze gunboats, believing himself to be the only senior officer who was not keen on getting involved in the trouble there. Indeed, Tweedie lamented that prior

[192] Kenneth Clifford, *Amphibious Warfare Development in Britain and America from 1920-1940*, (New York: Edgewood, 1983), pp.16-19.
[193] Admiral Tyrwhitt to Admiralty, 7 January 1927, TNA, ADM 1/8712/154.

to receiving the order sending him to China, he had been looking forward to a European posting that would allow him to spend more time with his wife.[194]

The China Station differed from the rest of the Royal Navy because of its experiences during 1925 and 1926. The Wanxian Incident in particular demonstrated that amid growing nationalist sentiment in China, localised clusters of the populace could no longer be coerced by the appearance of a British gunboat. Violent British actions were increasingly seen as having been made against the Chinese nation and not just against regional populations within China. This added to the existing subtle, but deep-set, institutional reluctance within the China Station towards gunboat diplomacy as a strategy. Not only were gunboat tactics proving to be increasingly ineffective, but their demise offered the opportunity to remove the drain of mundane operations aboard cramped vessels that took men and resources away from what were seen as the 'real' duties of the Royal Navy.

A sudden influx in contrast to ordinary fleet rotation

Over the course of a warship's posting to any single station, its crew never remained the same for the whole commission. At regular points a portion, or indeed the entire complement, would be 'paid off' and sent back to the UK, either to rest at their home naval base or to leave the Service. In 1924, for example, both *Magnolia* and *Hollyhock* paid off their full crews at Hong Kong, taking aboard new replacements.[195] For reasons of practicality and continuity, however, this process was usually an on-going one, with small groups of officers and men replaced when they were due for rotation or retirement. The China Station's cruisers were treated slightly differently, with the vessels sent back to Britain when a replacement cruiser arrived, such as the switch of *Cairo* with *Diomede* in 1922.[196]

While replacement crews certainly did produce some changes in approach, for the most part newly arrived officers opted on the side of caution. There appear to be three likely reasons why this was the case, in contrast to the more disruptive impact from the influx of new personnel in 1927. Firstly, numbers were clearly a factor as prior to 1927, particularly during quieter months, it was entirely feasible for the one or two new commanders to actually call upon the Commander-in-Chief or the Rear Admiral commanding the Yangtze

[194] Tweedie, *The Story of a Naval Life*, p.234.
[195] China Station monthly reports to Admiralty, 1924, TNA, ADM 116/2262.
[196] Ship's log of HMS *Diomede,* 1922-1923, TNA, ADM 53/75885.

gunboats. In doing so, there was time for the senior officer to provide a detailed briefing on the assigned role as well as the general situation in China. No such luxury was available in late 1926 or 1927. Vice-Admiral Tyrwhitt was not only busy travelling between locations trying to manage the crisis, but with thirty-six new warships arriving along with further replacement commanders it was impractical to give them the same preparatory briefings. Indeed, Commander Hamilton's experience in Hong Kong, with Commodore Pearson lacking a detailed understanding of Tyrwhitt's plans, highlights that the China Station's command, control, and communication structure was struggling.[197]

The second factor is the rank and general experience of the newly arriving officers and where they were being posted. During the comparatively peaceful early 1920s, the majority of replacements were for the gunboats and sloops, which involved junior officers being given their first full command afloat. Given their inexperience of sole command, unfamiliarity with their new environment, and since they were aboard quite modest warships, they were less apt to make rash decisions that could significantly harm their career development. In contrast, many of the destroyer commanders arriving in 1927 were on their second commands and the cruiser captains were seasoned officers. Captain England, for example, was forty-three in 1927, had been given his first command - the small destroyer HMS *Fawn* - back in 1909, and had been decorated for bravery during the First World War.[198] With years of experience, those officers were not just practised in dealing with the demands inherent with command, but they were also expected to provide decisive leadership.

Finally, it was made clear from the beginning that the surge of warships heading to China were not intended to stay there permanently. The orders sent to the vessels despatched emphasised it was a short-term attachment to the China Station.[199] Likewise, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Viscount Bridgeman, publically stated in the House of Commons that the expeditionary force deployed to East Asia was a temporary measure.[200] As a result, there were limited consequences for those officers on attachment, compared with those permanently based in the region. A river gunboat commander, for example, may have had

[197] Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-1928.
[198] Service record of Hugh England, TNA, ADM 196/49/69.
[199] Admiral Tyrwhitt to Admiralty, 17 July 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2510.
[200] Hansard, 2 March 1927, v.203, cc. 358-9.

to continue working with his Chinese counterparts for years to come after a clash. In contrast, it was unlikely many of the newly arrived commanders would have to worry about such interactions, even if in practice it was later decided that one of the two destroyer flotillas should be permanently attached to the China Station.[201] Awareness of potential consequences did not always mean officers behaved diplomatically, as was clearly the case with Lieutenant Commander Acheson during the events preceding the Wanxian Incident.[202] The frequency with which the temporarily attached ships become involved in clashes, however, and the volume of ammunition consumed in dealing with them, are clear indicators that newly arrived commanders were not worried about the long-term impact on their personal standing in China.

New approaches and the Nelson Spirit

Considering the historiographical debate about whether or not there remained an anti-intellectual atmosphere within the 1920s Royal Navy, a look at grass-roots level yields some interesting results. To begin with, across all the accounts from both permanent and temporary members of the China Station, there are no records that suggest ordinary officers were dismissive of new technology in any way. This runs in contrast to the arguments by Arthur Marder and Jon Sumida that many officers were reluctant to adopt new equipment that mechanised existing processes.[203] Those arguments were largely made in reference to the battle-fleet and wartime tactics, however, where the proposed equipment was more complicated and the consequences potentially far greater. In contrast, on the China Station the benefits of using new wireless sets, for example, were fairly obvious to all concerned. Indeed, by late 1927 Vice Admiral Tyrwhitt was putting pressure on merchant vessels to purchase and install radios, to aid the Royal Navy in its anti-piracy work.[204] Likewise, the range of new operational uses for aircraft from the carrier HMS *Hermes* found between its first and second deployments to Hong Kong from display flights to scouting patrols ahead of the anti-piracy raids in Mirs Bay showed not just an acceptance of new technology but an enthusiasm for employing it.[205] Together this adds a little nuance to existing debates, by

[201] Hansard, 12 May 1930, v.236, cc.1299-300.
[202] Consul A.E. Eastes to Sir Ronald Macleay, 7 September 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[203] Marder, 'The Influence of History on Sea Power', 439; Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy*, pp.185-265.
[204] Admiral Tyrwhitt to Admiralty, 21 September 1927, TNA, ADM 116/2502.
[205] E.g. Ship's log of HMS *Hermes* 1926-27, TNA, ADM 53/78830; China Station correspondence, 1926-27, TNA, ADM 116/2502.

highlighting that the grand theoretical arguments about operations involving fleet vessels only illustrate what was happening within one, admittedly very important, segment of the Navy. While previous reforms had much diminished its brown-water forces, the 1920s Royal Navy was still far more than just a battle-fleet.

Exploring the changing tactical approaches taken by the China Station towards the challenges it faced produces a slightly different picture to that involving technology. In particular, the phase between the Wanxian Incident and late 1927 provides a range of cases where officers deliberately resisted moving away from long-established policies. Hamilton's efforts to provoke a clash at Jiujiang, for example, went completely against the new tactics proposed by Cameron and harked back to an earlier Victorian understanding of gunboat diplomacy. Outlining what he felt the situation to be in his journal, Hamilton argued that the Royal Navy was only on the Yangtze due to trade, and if the Chinese could not be trusted to ensure law and order, then Britain should do so by employing garrisons and gunboats. Moreover, Hamilton felt that any withdrawal would see British steamers have to fall back, which would severely damage British Imperial prestige.[206] While particularly vocal in his beliefs, Hamilton was not alone in holding that view, with many officers struggling to countenance alternative strategies or tactics for dealing with the situation in China, no matter how effective or not they might be.

Behind the conservatism displayed by many Royal Navy officers in China, their core mind-set appears to be tied in with a belief in the value of a Nelson Spirit, with attitude more important than tactics. This is hardly surprising when considering the early training those officers would have received as cadets or at the staff colleges. Harry Dickinson, for example, argues that the historical knowledge of many junior officers prior to the First World War amounted to 'little more than tales of heroic action and daring deed'.[207] There were some efforts at reforming the system during and after the war, but the focus remained on spirit over technical training.[208] Beyond Jutland and submarine warfare, the Cambridge University Course for Naval Officers in 1922, for example, was heavily based around lectures exhorting the bravery displayed in the time of Nelson. In the amphibious warfare section there was

[206] Journal of Commander Hamilton, 1927-28.
[207] Dickinson, *Educating the Royal Navy*, p.212.
[208] Bell, 'The King's English and the Security of the Empire', 699.

not even a single mention of what had occurred at Gallipoli or Zeebrugge, just a few years beforehand, with the main focus on Wolfe's exploits at Quebec in 1759.[209] So pronounced was the focus upon the exploits of famous admirals, when it came to leadership training that many cadets and junior officers regarded the training with a high degree of cynicism.[210]

Commander Darley's attempted cutting out of the two merchant steamers at Wanxian, against overwhelming odds, was a product of that unbalanced approach to education. Darley and his force went into action with the unwavering belief that their bravery and Nelson Spirit would leave Chinese troops in awe, recognising the inherent superiority of the Royal Navy, and throw down their arms.[211] As retold in HMS *Despatch's* account of the preparations: 'It was thought that… the men on board the 'Wanhsien' on seeing an armed party suddenly draw up alongside would down arms.'[212] In reality, Chinese troops were increasingly armed with weapons capable of matching those used by the Navy, and they were also willing actually to use them.[213] Lieutenant K.R. Buckley's submission to the Naval Review in 1930, reporting the Third Destroyer Flotilla's experiences while in China, demonstrates how the new arrivals failed to appreciate fully the significance of Wanxian. The report summarised the lesson from the incident as 'Their (the gunboats) bluff was called at Wanhsien and it was seen that, with the modern weapons of war now in China, something bigger was needed to provide security for treaty ports.'[214] Upgrading the naval deterrent from a gunboat to a destroyer at some middle Yangtze ports did provide an additional eighty sailors and two more main guns, but that changed the balance little if they were pitted against thousands of relatively well-armed Chinese troops ashore.

It was not therefore so much a case of anti-intellectual attitudes directly holding back the adoption of new tactics to deal with the evolving challenges faced in China, but rather a long-term consequence of the inadequacies of the Royal Navy's system for educating its young officers. There was an enthusiasm for exploring new ways of using technology and for improving the way in which the Navy went about its precise tasks. When it came to dealing with the changing environment in which they operated, however, many officers displayed

[209] Cambridge Course for Naval Officers, 1922-1923, Humphreys Files, KCLMA, Catalogue ID 1238.
[210] Romans, 'Leadership Training For Midshipmen', p.179.
[211] Consul A.E. Eastes to Sir Ronald Macleay, 7 September 1926, TNA, ADM 116/2509.
[212] Allen, *With HMS Despatch to China*, p.20.
[213] Chan, *Arming the Chinese*, pp.47-114.
[214] Buckley, 'The Third Destroyer Flotilla in China', p.99.

the hallmarks of anti-intellectualist behaviour through their weak training in objectively assessing the situation. Other factors were at play, however, with racial attitudes common within the Navy towards the Chinese just as significant as reluctance to change. Echoing the words of Director of Naval Intelligence Rear Admiral Gerald Dickens in 1935, the Royal Navy's patronising and prejudiced attitude towards Asian peoples was just as problematic in its dealings with China as it would become with Japan.[215] Regarding Chinese troops as naturally inferior contributed to significant underestimations about the increasingly tenuous position Britain was in, and was the underlying reason why new tactics, such as those developed by Rear Admiral Cameron in late 1926, were necessary.

Summary

Over the course of the 1920s there were a number of gradual developments in the approach taken by the Royal Navy towards China, and the impact those changes had upon the course of events. Most notably, there was a slow and steady shift towards using greater levels of violence in providing forceful responses to threats, whether ashore or afloat. Much of that trend was catalysed by growing nationalist sentiment in China and with it the contagion impact of localised events spreading rapidly across discontiguous regions. Fundamentally, the Navy was struggling to cope with the new environment in China, where it was dealing with numerous, increasingly well-armed groups operating in isolation, but linked by a common sense of identity. This process ultimately culminated in the violent events at Wanxian in September 1926, which represented the real end of the Royal Navy's purposeful use of gunboat diplomacy in China. From that point onwards, the Navy's behaviour in China became less about trying forcefully to coerce the local population into accepting a form of British imperial presence ashore, and more about simply defending a reduced number of core ports. As events developed, it proved an impossible task to protect much more than Shanghai and Hong Kong, although the Navy continued to operate far inland up the Yangtze and West rivers. Just as the final line was drawn by the British commanders in the region, with plans to offer a sustained defence of Shanghai's International Settlement, the diplomatic situation moved on and war was avoided. Britain formally agreed to a new post-imperial relationship with China, and the Guomindang

[215] Lecture on 'Japan and Sea Power' by the Director of Naval Intelligence, 15 May 1935, KCLMA, Catalogue ID 1114, Chapter two.

dropped its anti-foreign rhetoric to focus on its new struggle with the Chinese Communist Party.

The cases after the Wanxian Incident where British warships employed gunboat tactics generally came as a result of the diverse force assembled during the crisis triggered by the Northern Expedition. Newly arrived officers did not generally receive sufficient guidance necessary to fully understand the situation in China and tended to act in a particularly aggressive manner. The nature of that unprepared naval relief force is something that has not previously been explored in the existing historiography, with general assumptions that the Royal Navy operated as one. In reality, a significant range of attitudes and approaches were taken by the different officers, with the China Station possessing a distinct personality. The China Station warships not only appeared visibly different, with their bright white painted hulls, but the unusual circumstances in East Asia produced a specific mind-set, when compared to the rest of the Navy's global operations. This is potentially of significance when examining the Navy's operations elsewhere around the British Empire during the period, where local forces may have been affected by the arrival of new warships, which would require further research beyond this thesis.

On the peacetime frontline of the British Empire, the Royal Navy's officers did display some of the traits discussed during existing debates about an anti-intellectualist attitude existing within the Service during the early twentieth century. This was significant in the way the newly arrived officers in 1927 behaved, given an unwillingness among some officers to adapt to the new environment and find a solution that met Britain's interests in the region. In particular, this proved problematic when combined with those exhibiting a strong focus on the 'Nelson Spirit', putting greater emphasis on their aggressive spirit and taking direct action, than developing more effective tactics. There was still a strong desire to make use of new technologies to improve the effectiveness with which the Navy could conduct its required duties. This stands in contrast to some of the debates within the battle fleet of the Navy during this period, where officers resisted mechanising certain fighting functions. Reluctance to adopt new ideas among ordinary officers was certainly not the same as a reluctance to use new equipment.

The changing tactical approaches taken by the Royal Navy in China had a significant bearing upon the ways events developed, even if they evolved quite slowly over much of the

decade. While the Wanxian Incident represented a significant turning point, the roots of the crisis went back much further. Of all the challenges, however, that faced the China Station in its efforts to support Britain's presence in East Asia it was one completely unrelated to tactical or even strategic thought that proved the most influential. Ultimately, the lack of respect shown towards the Chinese, and the resulting failure to appreciate their greater military capabilities, undermined Britain's ability to control a measured withdrawal of informal empire. The same racially charged attitude of complacency existed towards the Japanese and would prove particularly costly in later years. The Royal Navy in the 1920s still had to balance the requirements between presenting a deterrent towards Japan, while facing against the threats posed by the situation in China. It is important therefore to go beyond considering the Navy's operations on the Chinese coast, and how technology and tactics influenced the approach taken, to consider events against the wider context of the naval situation in East Asia.

Conclusion

Returning to its peacetime work after the First World War, the Royal Navy's China Station found itself on a new frontline as the British Empire struggled to adapt to a changed world environment, born out of years of conflict, revolution, and turmoil. The decade of 'violent peace' that followed saw fundamental shifts in both Britain's relationship with China and the Royal Navy's strategic position in East Asia. A core theme revealed by this thesis has been the extent to which those naval and imperial developments were interrelated. Localised issues involving the defence of Britain's outposts of informal empire were inherently interlinked with matters of grand defence strategy. The work done by the China Station had a central role in both the maintenance of the Empire and in Britain's strategic planning, although not always in ways that were valued or appreciated by the Royal Navy at the time. Developments in naval technology and tactics could and did play important parts in the evolving relationship between the two countries, and not just through moments of violence. In return, fluctuations in Britain's imperial position in China had a significant influence over the strategies developed in Whitehall to counter the threats posed by both the global spread of communism and Japan's growing military might. Bringing together those two strands, this thesis shows just how important events in East Asia were during the period. In particular, it highlights the often overlooked 1927 Shanghai Crisis, which triggered one of the Royal Navy's most significant peacetime deployments of naval power in its history. Britain's naval history of the interwar period is not just one of a battle-fleet preparing for a possible future decisive major engagement. The mainstream Royal Navy maintained an active operational deployment on the Chinese coast throughout the 1920s, fighting what amounted to an on-going low intensity conflict.

A vital new angle that this thesis adds to our understanding of Britain's imperial relationship with China comes from breaking down the image of the Royal Navy as a wall of blue uniforms, wholly committed to imperialist ideals. A complex array of issues lay behind many of the key moments that influenced the fortunes of the British Empire in East Asia, with human and technical factors as important as ideology and instructions from the metropole. Just as Robert Bickers' detailed analysis of Richard Tinkler's experiences with the SMP yielded new insights into the realities of life on the periphery of Empire, this study adds

similar colour to our understanding of the Navy's role in those developments.[1] By revealing the lives and experiences of Britain's gunboat crews, this thesis highlights the limited influence that senior diplomats, politicians, and military commanders had upon events. Junior officers were often placed in positions with an unduly weighty responsibility for the implementation of foreign policy. Individual abilities, training, aptitude, and attitudes towards their work were all just as significant as official policy. Some were consummate professionals, whereas others let egos, career aspirations, and racial prejudices cloud their judgement. The personality traits of key individuals played defining roles in each of the most contentious violent clashes involving the Royal Navy.

At the height of the 1927 crisis, one event in particular demonstrates how the approach taken by this thesis in combining naval and imperial aspects improves our understanding of a pivotal period in Anglo-Chinese relations. At thirty-seven past three on 24 March 1927 the city of Nanjing reverberated as HMS *Emerald* and two USN destroyers hurled a salvo of shells at the city's northernmost extremities. The significance of the decisions made by *Emerald's* Captain Hugh England, both immediately before and after that critical moment, have either been over or under-stated by imperial and naval historians ever since. That cacophonous cannonade crowned an incident that suitably illustrates a period of momentous changes and challenges for the Royal Navy and British Empire as a whole. *Emerald* was part of a vast peacetime armada, led by officers with minimal knowledge of local circumstances who therefore adopted out-dated tactics, which had already been proven ineffective in a rapidly modernising China. Throughout the Nanjing Incident, diplomats and indeed diplomacy were side-lined as the two groups of armed individuals were caught in a maelstrom that led to a violent clash with lasting repercussions for the nations they represented. Imperial dominance was on the wane, and the Navy's furthest outposts were already being proactively and reactively withdrawn. As a result, the parade of naval strength that *Emerald* was a part of failed to mask that Chinese troops had already called Britain's gunboat bluff on the upper Yangtze. *Emerald* and its American counterparts may have brought Nanjing to a standstill, allowing most remaining Anglo-American

[1] Bickers, *Empire Made Me.*

personnel to be evacuated, but the violence only added momentum to the wave of change swamping Britain's extra-territorial outposts.

The Royal Navy as an organisation provided the bulk of the ordinary, everyday contact between the British establishment and China's officials and population. While technology was improving the ability of the Service to control those interactions, this thesis shows that events such as those at Nanjing were often dictated by decisions made by relatively junior officers. Independent command was much rarer in the 1920s Royal Navy that it had been in previous decades, but we should not over-state the level of top-down control it was possible for senior command to exert in practice. The stories of those individuals who manned the China Station therefore take on a far greater significance in the broader debates of Britain's position in the interwar world. Sometimes those who made the 'great man' decisions that changed the path of events were actually the ordinary individuals on the scene, who have until now remained nameless and forgotten.

The Royal Navy and Imperial Policing

The China Station's anti-piracy work and implementation of gunboat diplomacy have been key features in accounts of the period. What this study highlights is the degree of continuity between how the Royal Navy approached those interrelated roles, but not always in the ways that it has often been assumed. For both duties, the China Station had always been reliant upon bluff and the ability of young gunboats commanders to realise that the Navy's work in those areas could only succeed if threats of violence were sparingly implemented. Examining the mechanics of those duties in detail, this thesis shows how reluctant the Admiralty was about deploying resources towards tasks it saw as peripheral to the safety of the British Empire. As a result, the China Station was re-instated with a relatively modest gunboat force in 1919, little different in strength to that in place either side of the Boxer Rebellion twenty years earlier. China was changing rapidly in ideas, technology, and international outlook, but the China Station's resources remained much the same. The Admiralty was committed to the defence of the Empire, but there was an institutional reluctance towards supporting peripheral informal aspects, long established by the 1920s and which pre-dated the corresponding changes in public and diplomatic stances.

By understanding and acknowledging that continuity and those attitudes, it allows us to better grasp the great significance of the task force sent out to China in 1927. This thesis demonstrates that not only was it the largest peacetime deployment of Royal Navy warships east of Suez between 1919 and 1939, but that it also brought Britain close to partial mobilisation. At no other point during the interwar period did that occur, even during the Chanak and Abyssinian crises. As a result, the thesis highlights that Shanghai 1927 is the often-forgotten crisis - a pivotal moment that played a huge role in defining the path of East Asian geo-politics in the following decade.

Fully appreciating the scale of escalation in the military approach taken in late 1926 is vital for two reasons. Firstly, it was not just a last roll of the dice for the British Empire. As an extraordinary display of hard power in peacetime, it strongly suggests that the British government was extremely concerned about the wider significance of what was happening in China. In particular, the relationship between events in China and the global struggle against communism. The question in the minds of British officials was what impact it would have on the safety of the entire British Empire if an anti-imperialist group, supported by Soviet Russia, were seen to succeed in forcing major concessions out of Whitehall. The timing of the task force's full deployment, with many vessels despatched after the diplomatic agreements conceding extra-territorial rights on the Upper and Middle Yangtze, highlights that a line had been drawn, beyond which there was a genuine risk of war. Moreover, it represented a significant statement by the British government in re-affirming that the British Empire was still the global superpower, as no other power in 1927 had the military resources to sustain a similar deployment. Whether the Shanghai response represented a peak moment for British naval power projection or came in the years after the zenith had already been passed is perhaps a rather academic and moot point. It does, however, represent a far more pivotal moment than any one of the new warships launched by Japan or America in the period, which have frequently been used as a crude yardstick to measure naval power. Of far greater practical significance for the years to follow, the Shanghai deployment was Britain's last serious and confident attempt at demonstrating global naval supremacy, before unilateral efforts made way for an increasingly multilateral approach towards global crises.

Secondly, the task force highlights just how exposed Britain's position in East Asia had been during the early 1920s. The defence of Britain's informal imperial interests in China had been conducted very efficiently, but it frequently left warships and their crews extremely isolated and vulnerable. As surplus wartime military equipment flooded into the region, the relatively safety of life aboard gunboats in mid-river was taken away. When faced by those new threats, the gunboat crews knew that rescue forces and reinforcements would take considerable time to arrive. That background knowledge influenced their decisions in such hazardous circumstances, although not always with the same end result. This is particularly important to consider when exploring the Royal Navy's imperial policing work. Individual officers still had an unbridled confidence in Britain's overall naval power. However, when judging their actions we should keep in mind just how dangerous the situations were that they were placed in and the impact that may have had upon their behaviour.

The extent to which the China Station's crews were exposed to danger during the 1920s relates to another important finding of this thesis – the earlier date for the collapse of gunboat diplomacy in China. Following a decade of traumatic changes around the world in the 1910s, the 1920s Royal Navy faced numerous significant regional challenges in its role as Britain's 'imperial gendarmerie'. As a result of the new questions being asked of the Navy in East Asia, China became the focus of a sustained active deployment unseen elsewhere in the world during that decade. This began with the task of reining in the flourishing levels of piracy, which had become a significant hazard for trade passing along China's waterways and coast. Not only was the scale of piracy in Chinese waters a challenge, but this thesis has shown how the nature of the threat was itself relatively new and why that is so significant.

In particular, hostage-taking and hijacking had emerged as the predominant modus operandi among the pirate bands. Those types of attack were, and still are, difficult to prevent, detect, or respond to. The British gunboats available were also simply not designed or equipped for dealing with such low-level threats. Not only did 'internal piracy' represent a new challenge, but this thesis has shown that there was also considerable reluctance within the Royal Navy to be drawn into what many officers considered to be an issue for the local civilian port authorities. Responsibility nonetheless fell upon the China Station. That institutional disinterest in countering modern piracy combined with post-war financial

restrictions to result in only a small pool of pre-existing resources being assigned to dealing with the problem, further limiting the effectiveness of the Royal Navy's response.

Indeed, the China Station was the Admiralty's third largest global deployment after the First World War, but the resources available were quite modest when compared with what they were expected to achieve. By exploring their day-to-day duties, such as counter-piracy patrols, this thesis highlights how a remarkable amount of the Royal Navy's active operational work in peacetime was done by a surprisingly small segment of the Service. Moreover, as gunboat service was generally not valued as a career path, this adds to our understanding of the culture of the interwar Royal Navy. Opportunities to gain significant independent command experience and familiarity with combat pressures, were overlooked in favour of training with the battle fleet. When compared to those well-studied capital ships, which spent the period largely dormant, the work of the Royal Navy's small ships in fighting the little wars of Empire should be the focus of far greater research.

The visible and secret influences of new technology

Throughout the decade as it was busy maintaining the periphery of Empire, the China Station was not a constant, un-evolving entity. The Admiralty were receptive to using technology as a means of prolonging the effectiveness of the gunboat bluff and sometimes actively encouraged the use of new equipment as a means of reducing the cost of such duties. While this thesis shows that new technology did often help the Royal Navy, the impact was far outweighed by the significant improvements in equipment available to China's armies and pirate bands. As a result, the effectiveness with which British gunboats could conduct their duties changed as the safety of their crews decreased even further. This is significant as it demonstrates that Britain's military edge was not just being rapidly eroded at the top level, by major power arms races, but that it applied in general. Military aircraft and armoured vehicles were formidable new threats to second tier powers, insurgents, and bandits, but Britain's technological advantage was on the wane. Just as the mass-availability of modern weaponry after the First World War contributed to violence and revolutionary activity in Eastern Europe during the 1920s, it also played a key role in changing the balance of power in East Asia.[2]

[2] Gerwarth, *The Vanquished*, p.9.

Amid those dangers human factors rose to the fore. Aggressive or unstable junior officers were placed in high-risk, high-pressure situations, sometimes culminating in truly catastrophic consequences, such as at Shamian Island and Wanxian. This thesis argues that gunboat diplomacy had already reached its crisis point well before the clashes of 1926, partly as a result of those human factors. The violent events that resulted were therefore symptoms and not the cause of the collapse of Britain's Victorian imperial approach to China. Reviewing the violence seen at Shamian, Wanxian, and Nanjing also highlights the importance of human and technical factors in determining the wider course of Anglo-Chinese relations during the period. The situations arose as a result of British imperial policy, but the outcomes were dictated by local factors. These fit into two main categories – a lack of adequate equipment, and a failing outdated structure for controlling and supporting individual commanders.

While the overall balance was not in the Royal Navy's favour, technology did enable them to do more with less, prolonging Britain's ability to maintain the status quo for its outposts of informal Empire in East Asia. Not all the measures were primarily intended to improve productivity, with many peacetime benefits of new equipment tangential to their wartime purpose, particularly in the case of submarines and aircraft carriers. Radio equipment was the most significant of the enhancements, allowing the China Station's submarines to ease the burdens on the surface fleet, for example, by patrolling for potentially pirated merchant ships. The Silent Service is rarely thought of as having been a tool for imperial policing, but submarines played a significant role by freeing up manpower for other duties. Quietly hunting potentially pirated vessels was also felt to offer more realistic exciting scenarios for preparing submarine crews for wartime, than pre-planned exercises with other Royal Navy warships. In this way, this thesis helps show the operational history of the Royal Navy in peace and war is not one of two separate stories, but heavily interlinked developments.

The employment of new technology on the China Station during the 1920s has yielded perhaps the most controversial finding from this study. Britain's first purpose-built aircraft carrier HMS *Hermes* was attached to the China Station nominally on imperial policing purposes, given its ability to transport hundreds of soldiers quickly against potential threats. *Hermes'* deployment to East Asia took pressure off of the China Station's surface fleet and also enabled aerial patrols to help avoid unwanted violent clashes. Despite achieving

temporary successes in that role, this thesis reveals that *Hermes'* deployment had another hidden motive and one that the British government were eager to keep secret. *Hermes* delivered supplies and aircraft that would form the basis for converting Kai Tak in Hong Kong into a military airfield, in contravention of the Washington Treaty.

In part *Hermes'* secret mission emphasises the value the British government attributed to the Washington Treaty during the early 1920s, given Whitehall's unwillingness to risk an obvious breach of its terms. There is no clear evidence as to whether the British government explicitly approved that decision, highlighting the sensitivity of the matter, although it seems unlikely that senior cabinet members were wholly unaware of what was happening. It also highlights that it was not just the Axis antagonists of the Second World War who quietly undermined the interwar peace and disarmament treaties in the pursuit of their own national interests. Additional examples are likely to be discovered in time, involving all the major powers, which will further emphasise the limitations of the interwar disarmament treaties. Questions are also raised by the increasingly open ways that Britain infringed on the clause restricting development of military bases beyond Singapore towards the end of the decade, before seeking its removal from the London Naval Treaty in 1930. In particular, this suggests that all was not quite how it seemed behind the British government's official assertions that disarmament treaties remained a cornerstone of British foreign policy and grand strategy in that key period.

A violent failure of tactical change - The end of gunboat diplomacy

While the efforts to improve the efficiency with which the Royal Navy could defend Britain's interests in East Asia were driven by economic necessity, wider changes in attitude towards the role of violence in imperial policing also took effect. In the aftermath of the First World War, public distaste for fresh conflict had an impact on the decisions made about how to defend Britain's outposts of Empire. This thesis shows that there were also changes in the attitudes of naval personnel towards the use of lethal force against those who opposed the Empire. There was greater concern within the Admiralty about negative public reactions through heavy-handed actions, reflected in the stronger language and restrictions present in orders issued to the China Station over the decade. Indeed, this thesis highlights that while the 1926 December Memorandum marks when the British government was most concerned about violence on the ground, many of the rules for officers on the scene were simply

restatements of those already in place. This is of wider importance because it shows that far from being pushed into reducing the level of violence used in enforcing Britain's foreign policy, the Royal Navy itself played an active role from early on in the process of change.

The First World War may have catalysed a shift in attitudes within the Royal Navy towards imperial violence, but this did not prevent the evolution of a violent form of gunboat diplomacy in China. Initially, there was an attempt to return to pre-war tactics, focused upon coercive behaviour backed up by the threat of reprisals. Short, sharp bursts of usually excessive violence could reinforce the impression of power. The regular, sustained, and widespread clashes by 1926 however, exposed the reliance of interwar gunboat diplomacy's on bluffing the Chinese population. Not even at its peak power could the British Empire afford to maintain the permanent levels of military force required, worldwide, to enforce such an approach. While there was no single climactic incident that heralded the end of gunboat diplomacy in China, the growing background crisis took its toll.

The resulting pressure that junior officers were placed under, both in relation to anti-piracy work and countering threats against treaty ports led to some bending of the rules of engagement, while others either re-actively or pro-actively chose to employ the weapons at their disposal. As naval fusillades became more commonplace, the China Station's gunboat flotilla slid from being a coercive force to one reliant upon the actual use of violence to achieve its aims. The Royal Navy recognised that the situation was unsustainable, but attempts to develop new strategies failed, largely due to the inability to lift the pressure from the officers attempting to implement them. It was a case of too little, too late. As a result, efforts to withdraw from commitments to the middle and upper Yangtze were undermined by individual officers taking alternative paths. This process was not helped by a consistent lack of adequate leadership by the Commanders-in-Chief between 1924 and 1927. Rear-Admiral Sir Allan Everett suffered a mental breakdown, Vice-Admiral Sir Edwyn Alexander-Sinclair failed to communicate effectively with his officers, and Vice-Admiral Reginald Tyrwhitt's mixed messages caused confusion. Ultimately, however, the disastrous attempts to up-date the Royal Navy's approach to China during the period reflected deep-set institutional flaws regarding the Service's attitude towards peacetime operations.

The complacency with which the Royal Navy fought the 'little wars of Empire' is visible in the progression of events towards the carnage at Shamian, Wanxian, and Nanjing, with

frequent contradictions between official policy, strategy, personal intent, and end-results. This highlights an area that requires greater research in general – the processes by which imperial policing led to mass-casualty clashes, particularly ones involving subjugated populations. Naval bombardments may have ended with similar results, but they occurred for a variety of reasons and were influenced by a range of factors including: breakdowns in mental health (Shamian), aggressive individual officers (Wanxian), inaccurate weaponry (Nanjing), limitations of equipment (Wanxian and Nanjing), and mistaken identity (Yangtze riverside engagements). Of particular significance is the finding that imperial identity and beliefs may have been a background catalyst in almost all such clashes, but it was usually only a secondary factor. In terms of causality therefore, aggressive conduct by British officers did not always result from those individuals intending to commit acts of violence in support of the Empire.

The events of the 24 March 1927 at Nanjing provide a valuable case study for the historical caution required when assessing casualties resulting from politically contentious clashes. This thesis has shown that Captain England did not order his men to bombard the city directly on the first day of the incident, as has sometimes been suggested, but instead targeted a sparsely populated area on the extremity of Nanjing.[3] His behaviour the following day in threatening to punitively bombard the city and the general impression given by a major warship firing towards Nanjing have clouded our understanding of the incident. By looking in detail at the events of the 24 March, it is possible to say that if reports of 2,000 civilian deaths that day are accurate, the majority did not result from British actions, although the numbers are likely to be higher than British claims at the time. Captain England had the intent and opportunity, but the evidence suggests that the most likely locations for civilian casualties were in areas either under machine-gun fire from American warships or where fighting occurred between rival groups of Chinese troops.

Those are relatively modest changes in our understanding of the events that day, but represent valuable lessons in the need for objective and detailed assessment of such horrific incidents. Indeed, while this thesis highlights that British responsibility for mass casualties at Nanjing has been overstated, the opposite is true in relation to Wanxian. Very few cases

[3] E.g. Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* p.138; Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain in Shanghai*, p.50.

offer sufficient evidence for historians to say with certainty the precise number of people killed and attribute direct blame for their deaths. What these cases show, however, is that there is usually enough material to challenge second-hand accounts, providing more accurate assessments, and in doing so present more nuanced explanations for who was responsible and why.

China's role in Britain's regional relationships with other navies

Along a similar line, by looking at a broad selection of events in China this thesis also adds greater depth to our understanding of the Royal Navy's relationships with the navies of other powers. The 1920s did feature considerable top-level wrangling between the world's major navies over arms limitation treaties, particularly between Britain, the USA, and Japan. From an operational point of view, however, there was a slightly different story. On the peacetime frontline on China's coastline and waterways, away from the diplomatic wrangling, foreign warships and their crews could operate really quite closely. To a large extent this camaraderie resulted from their mutually exposed location, separated by considerable distances from other warships flying the same flag.

British and American crews in particular appear to have regularly interpreted their official orders in favourable ways for their local counterparts - for their friends. A social rivalry between Royal Navy and US Navy crews was tolerated, even encouraged at times, but the regular hosting of Anglo-American boxing tournaments, dinners, cinema nights, and drinking sessions built a special connection. There was no official 'Special Relationship' and there was greater friction than between British and Dutch crews, but in times of crisis co-operation was generally given as freely as possible within the confines of official instructions and sometimes beyond them. In effect, an informal understanding was reached between the two navies that could be compared to the so-called 'good cop – bad cop' routine. Britain was already unpopular and so the Royal Navy could and would act aggressively to defend Anglo-American interests. Conversely, the US Navy was willing to use its neutrality as a calming influence at ports, even if it could not promise to defend actively the civilians or property of other nations if violence erupted. That is extremely significant when assessing many of the events around China during the late 1920s, particularly in terms of intent and the extent to which official foreign policies were actually adhered to on the scene. Indeed, however quickly the wartime alliance may have been abandoned in favour of official

antagonism at a senior level, the bonds between the two institutions and their crews remained.

The Royal Navy's relationship with the Imperial Japanese Navy is even more complicated than might be assumed from top-level debates. There was a general trend of worsening attitudes between British and Japanese service personnel in China, in keeping with existing understanding of the period. This seems to have been driven, by the official orders given to Japanese commanders as the IJN's rigid command structure left individual officers little room for manoeuvre. In contrast, Royal Navy officers were afforded greater freedom to act on their own initiative, despite the gradual shift towards centralisation. The positive or negative outcome of individual Anglo-Japanese interactions was therefore heavily influenced by the attitude of the British officer concerned. While this does not fundamentally change our understanding of the relationship between the two powers in the period, it raises the possibility that poor inter-personal relations may have undermined top-level cooperation. This would take further investigation to confirm, but it does add a human angle to existing debates about the failure of joint military efforts between Britain and Japan in China.

Worsening relations between British and Japanese officers serving on the Chinese coast came against a background decline in the two countries' overall relationship. The Royal Navy's top-level planning for a potential war with Japan also involved China, to an extent not previously acknowledged. Fortifying Singapore, securing naval superiority in the South China Seas with the battle fleet, and America's potential stance were all significant in Britain's grand strategy for East Asia. What this thesis shows, however, is that the Admiralty believed that the most likely triggers for a war between Britain and Japan would be related to China. Moreover, given geographic considerations, the Chinese coast would play a pivotal role in the outcome of any such conflict. What this shows is that the existing debates surrounding the speed with which the battle fleet could be assembled at Singapore are to an extent misaligned.

With hindsight, what happened at Pearl Harbor does raise questions as to whether this China-focused strategy took too much comfort from the low likelihood of a successful surprise attack. Likewise, based upon the events of 1927 in China, Britain's intelligence capabilities in East Asia were insufficient for the task of informing and forewarning the China

Station. The core strategic plan, however, was predicated on a reasonable assumption that major Royal Navy warships would already be heading east, before a Japanese campaign against Britain began, even if it was not the full battle fleet. The weakness in Britain's plans for countering Japan during the 1920s and early 1930s was not therefore one of timing and logistics. Instead, we should be focusing upon the lack of long-term planning in the years after the First World War, given that the steady planned growth in Japanese naval power was always going to neutralise Britain's core strategy by the mid-to-late 1930s. Contemporary discussion about deflecting Japanese aggression into China and vague allusions to possible Anglo-American alliances suggest an unwillingness to confront the real challenge, and that mentality of denial perhaps now requires further research.

This thesis also shows how the second stage of Britain's East Asia strategy, an attempted blockade against Japan, was likewise built around China. If the first leg was intended to prevent Britain losing the war, this was the phase that would decide whether the war could be won. This again adds a new angle to existing debates, particularly those exploring why Britain continued to commit to the defence of Hong Kong during the period, along with the contested status of Herbert Richmond as one of the great naval thinkers of his time. In terms of Britain's strategy for action off the Chinese coast, Richmond was certainly a talented analyst, but one who matured the fruits of Leveson's imagination. Holding Singapore might prevent Britain from losing the war, but the fate of Hong Kong would decide whether Britain could force Japan to terms. The cold, but calculated, decision to post a garrison was made with the belief that it might hold Hong Kong just long enough for relief against Japan and would deter Chinese aggression. The loss of that force would not compromise Britain's wider strategic position, but its potential success could lead to victory. Bell's discussion of Britain's continued garrisoning of its 'Exposed Outpost' is certainly valid for the 1930s, by which point the equation had swung further in Japan's favour. During the 1920s, however, while the balance of naval power was still on the Royal Navy's side, that was not an overly reckless gamble.

Much of this new argument runs in parallel with Christopher Bell's discussion of Hong Kong's position over the interwar period as a whole, but goes a step beyond Andrew Field's

argument.[4] China was not just a potential trigger for war, nor a passive playground for the imperial powers, but it formed an integral part of the Navy's plans. This went far beyond a 'deflection' strategy of encouraging Japanese expansion in Northern China, to occupy their resources and extend supply lines. Even during the mid-1920s, when the Guomindang was felt to represent the most immediate threat to Britain's informal empire in East Asia, the Royal Navy was already considering whether the same group might be able to help. In effect, key commentators within the Royal Navy had adopted the spirit of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. While this did not initially prompt formal discussions with the Guomindang or other warlords, the Navy was planning around the belief that some degree of modest, indirect assistance was likely. This highlights that while the Admiralty was disinterested in many imperial policing duties in China, it was interested in the role China could play in a future major conflict, whether in a passive or active capacity.

Discussion about the role China could play in a war against Japan also re-aligns how we approach Britain's strategic situation in the 1920s, and particularly its policy towards China. In a search for potential allies to brace Britain's position in East Asia, there were few alternatives other than China. Britain's potential European allies no longer wielded significant clout in the region. Likewise, few Royal Navy commentators felt the USA could be wholly relied upon, given the latter's stance during the First World War and official policy towards the defence of the treaty ports. Against that background, the lack of a clear central strategy for developing a positive relationship with China and reluctance to change the nature of Britain's informal empire, take on even greater significance. It was always unlikely that China would become a full British ally, given deep-set conflicts over extra-territorial rights, the Shanghai International Settlement, and particularly Hong Kong's future. The British Empire may have been the global superpower, but the failure to update imperial priorities in East Asia contributed directly towards revealing many of the Royal Navy's shortcomings. Political disinterest in the periphery of the Empire and anti-communist paranoia created an environment where the Royal Navy's efforts to develop an effective long-term strategy were overlooked complacently in favour the forlorn hope of maintaining the status quo.

[4] Bell, 'Our Most Exposed Outpost', 61-88; Field, *Royal Navy Strategy,* pp.53-64.

Summary: The Royal Navy's peacetime frontline

The key message from throughout the study is that the 1920s Royal Navy, its role in maintaining the British Empire, its organisation and culture, and even the attitudes of its personnel all present a complex picture, not easily reduced to a straightforward narrative. The Admiralty and many of its officers were nominally dismissive of its peacetime, lower-level work in imperial policing, particularly using gunboats. Nevertheless, the Royal Navy and those same individuals threw men, materiel, and energy into the task. Gunboat service itself was generally mundane and likely to hinder an officer's career, and yet it increasingly put those crews in the path of extreme danger, moreover in circumstances where decisions made by a young lieutenant could have a significant impact on the future of the British Empire in East Asia. While efforts have been made to understand what civilian Shanghailander officials thought, how that affected their decisions, and how it contributed to clashes with Chinese protestors, no study has previously treated Royal Navy personnel as individuals. Inspector Everson and the other leading actors in the Louza shooting, for example, have been assessed as humans with all their flaws, whereas Lieutenant Faure, Lieutenant Commander Acheson, Captain England, and their colleagues have been hidden by their uniforms.[5] This study highlights for the first time that they were all very different individuals and their actions came with personal as well as diplomatic consequences. Alcoholism, drug addiction, chronic injuries, forced retirement, and demotion were to greet those key protagonists in the aftermath of their actions.

The Royal Navy could and often did adapt quickly, readily, and logically in the face of opportunities and challenges, but at times it was also guilty of complacency and resistance to change. Anti-intellectualist sentiment was a contributing factor to some failures, along with factional friction between networks of officers. Indeed, many existing arguments over anti-intellectualism in the interwar Navy have elements of truth. A diverse range of attitudes were displayed across the Service, with personal views and loyalties influencing the willingness of individual officers to adapt to new proposals and tactics. There were unifying elements, however, common to the majority of officers, including a crucial and consistent lack of urgency to make changes, which stemmed in part from dismissive assumptions about

[5] Bickers, *Empire Made Me*, pp.164-172; Bickers, *Britain in China*, p.4; Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire,* pp.166-171; Fung, *Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat,* pp.40-42; Osterhammel, 'China', p.652.

Asia itself. Some officers were overtly racist and many displayed subtler orientalist attitudes, although they were far from universal. Of particular importance, however, was the way almost all Royal Navy officers failed to appreciate how quickly East Asia was modernising, as a result of underlying national and racial assumptions.

Perhaps the central conclusion is that the interwar Royal Navy involved considerably more than just the much-studied battle-fleet. That may seem an obvious statement to make, but this thesis serves as a reminder that the Royal Navy's smaller warships were heavily employed maintaining the British Empire, even if contemporary and subsequent debate has focused upon capital ships. For the China gunboats, that task generally involved a rather dull existence, but one where crews developed lasting bonds with their US Navy counterparts. At times it placed the servicemen in positions as dangerous as any seen in wartime, highlighting that peace was not always peaceful for Britain's armed forces. Indeed, the 1927 crisis pushed the Navy close to a war footing, as a variety of factors combined to put the Service in the path of the Guomindang's Northern Expedition. For the imperial history of Britain's relationship with China, this thesis has shown that the Royal Navy was not just a uniform and blunt tool of empire. Similarly for the naval history, the China Station played a complicated part in the British Empire's evolving relationship with China and events in China had a significant impact upon Britain's grand strategy for East Asia. Indeed, individual officers serving on the China Station and the equipment available to them were often far more significant, in their influence upon events, than distant diplomats and politicians. Sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. The slow evolution of the China Station during the 1920s was central to both how long the British Empire's informal interests in East Asia could be maintained and to the viability of the Empire's strategic defence. Those priorities were not always aligned, but they were interlinked, and so should be our study of the two.

Appendix 1: Categories of warship with examples

Battlecruiser – HMS *Hood* (Special Service Squadron Flagship)

Length: 860 foot
Displacement: 41,200 tons
Armament: 8 x 15" main guns, 12 x 5.5" guns, and 4 x 4" AA guns
Maximum design speed: 31 knots
Full complement: 1,430

Aircraft Carrier – HMS *Hermes* (China Station 1925-1926 and 1926-1928)

Length: 600 foot
Displacement: 10,850 tons
Armament: 6 x 5.5" guns, 4 x 4" AA guns, and 15 aircraft (in the 1920s)
Maximum design speed: 25 knots
Full complement: 565 (excluding aircrew)

Heavy Cruiser – HMS *Hawkins* (China Station Flagship 1919-1927)

Length: 605 foot
Displacement: 12,110 tons
Armament: 7 x 7.5" main guns, 8 x 3" AA guns, and 2 x 2pdr 'Pom Pom' AA guns
Maximum design speed: 30 knots
Full complement: 732

Light Cruiser – HMS *Carlisle* (China Station 1919-1928)

Length: 451 foot
Displacement: 5,240 tons
Armament: 5 x 6" main guns, 2 x 3" AA guns, 4 x 3pdr guns, and 2 x 2pdr 'Pom Pom' AA guns
Maximum design speed: 29 knots
Full complement: 375

Destroyer – HMS *Wanderer* (China Station 1926-1928)

Length: 300 foot
Displacement: 1,110 tons
Armament: 4 x 4.7" main guns and 2 x 2pdr 'Pom Pom' AA guns
Maximum design speed: 32 knots
Full complement: 134

Pre-WW1 Destroyer – HMS *Otter* (China Station 1900-1914)

Length: 214 foot
Displacement: 335 tons
Armament: 1 x 12pdr (3") main gun and 5 x 6pdr guns
Maximum design speed: 30 knots
Full complement: 70

Sloop – HMS *Bluebell* (China Station 1922-1927)

Length: 262 foot
Displacement: 1,200 tons
Armament: 2 x 3" main guns and 2 x 3pdr AA guns
Maximum design speed: 17 knots
Full complement: 77

River (Heavy) '*Insect* Class' Gunboat– HMS *Cockchafer* (China Station 1920-1937)

Length: 237 foot
Displacement: 645 tons
Armament: 2 x 6" main guns and 2 x 3" AA guns
Maximum design speed: 14 knots
Full complement: 53

Upper Yangtze Gunboat – HMS *Woodlark* (China Station 1900-1928)

Length: 145 foot
Displacement: 150 tons
Armament: 2 x 6pdr (2.2") guns
Maximum design speed: 13 knots
Full complement: 25

West River '*Heron* Class' Gunboat– HMS *Robin* (China Station 1900-1928)

Length: 108 foot
Displacement: 85 tons
Armament: 2 x 6pdr (2.2") guns
Maximum design speed: 9 knots
Full complement: 25

Submarine – *L20* (China Station 1919-1929)

Length: 239 foot
Displacement: 890 tons (surfaced)
Armament: 1 x 4" gun and 6 torpedo tubes
Maximum design speed: 17 knots (surfaced)
Full complement: 38

Submarine Depot Ship – HMS *Titania* (China Station 1919-1929)

Length: 350 foot
Displacement: 5,250 tons
Armament: 2 torpedo tubes and small-arms
Maximum design speed: 14 knots
Full complement: 239

Appendix 2: Royal Navy hierarchy in the 1920s

Admiral

Vice-Admiral

Rear-Admiral

Captain

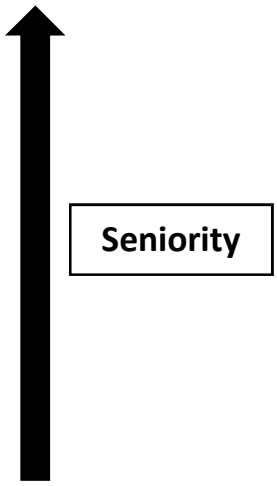
Commodore

Commander

Lieutenant Commander

Lieutenant

Midshipman



Appendix 3: Warship prefixes

Royal Navy - HMS

US Navy - USS

Imperial Japanese Navy - IJN

French Navy - FS

Italian Navy - RN

Netherlands Navy – HNLMS

Note: IJN is used over HIJMS for simplicity, and the modern NATO designation FS is used for France as the Marine Nationale does not use a prefix.

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